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The Complete Works of
CLARK ASHTON SMITH

(1893-1961)



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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Clark Ashton Smith". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

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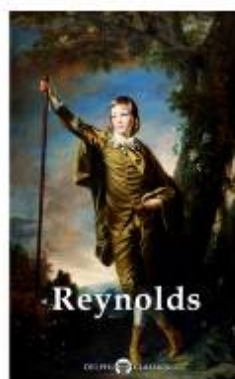
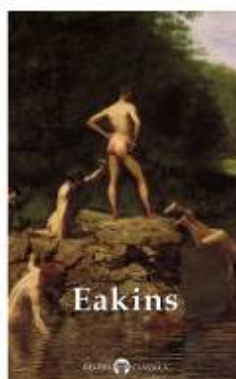
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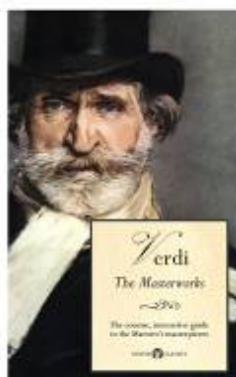
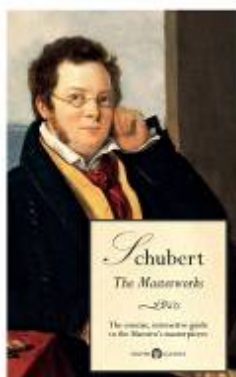
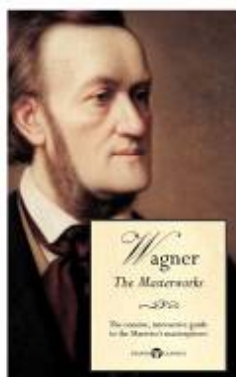
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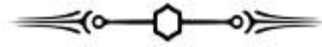
The Complete Works of
CLARK ASHTON SMITH



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Complete Works of Clark Ashton Smith



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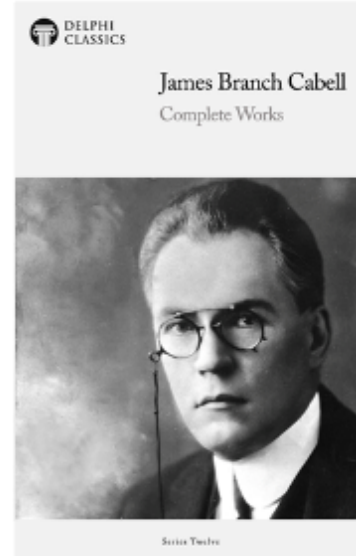
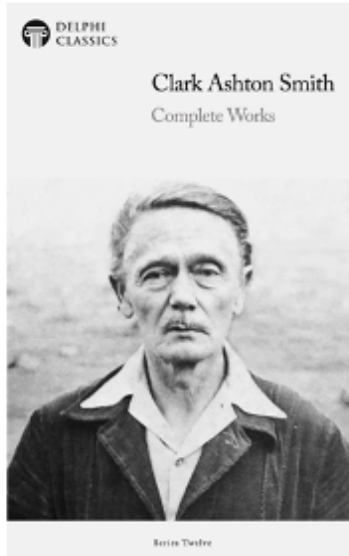
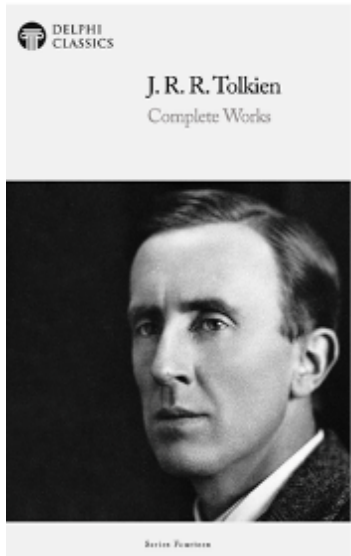
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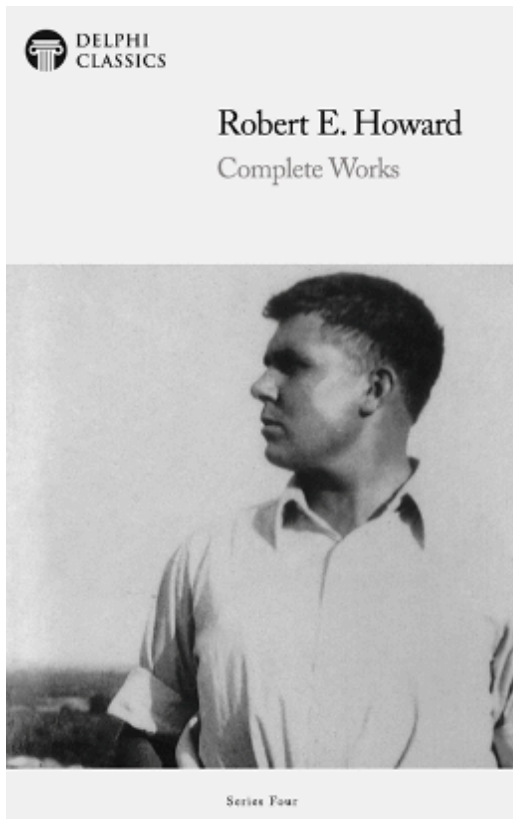


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The Averoigne Series



Smith wrote a series of eleven short stories set in medieval Averoigne, a fictional province in southern France. The province is renowned as the haunt of dangerous wizards, nefarious witches and seductive lamias...

The End of the Story (Weird Tales, May 1930)

A Rendezvous in Averoigne (Weird Tales, April 1931)

The Maker of Gargoyles (Weird Tales, August 1932)

The Mandrakes (Weird Tales, February 1933)

The Beast of Averoigne (Weird Tales, May 1933)

The Holiness of Azédarac (Weird Tales, November 1933)

The Colossus of Ylourgne (Weird Tales, June 1934)

The Disinterment of Venus (Weird Tales, July 1934)

Mother of Toads (Weird Tales, July 1938)

The Enchantress of Sylaire (Weird Tales, July 1941)

The Satyr (Genius Loci and Other Tales, 1948)

Averoigne (poetry) (Challenge, Spring 1951)

The Hyperborean Cycle



Smith's Hyperborean cycle takes place in the fictional prehistoric setting of Hyperborea, partly inspired by the stories of his friends H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard. Hyperborea was a legendary continent in the Arctic, which, before it was overwhelmed by the advancing ice sheets of the Pleistocene age, was a warm and fertile paradise, with lush jungles inhabited by the last remnants of the dinosaurs.

The Tale of Satampra Zeiros (Weird Tales, November 1931)

The Testament of Athammaus (Weird Tales, October 1932)

The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqquan (Weird Tales, June 1932)

The Door to Saturn (Strange Tales of Mystery and Terror, January 1932)

The House of Haon-Dor (1933)

The Ice-Demon (The Abominations of Yondo, Arkham House, 1960)

Ubbo-Sathla (Weird Tales, July 1933)

The Seven Geases (Weird Tales, October 1934)

The White Sybil (The White Sybil, Fantasy Publication, 1935)

The Coming of the White Worm (Stirring Science Stories, April 1941)

The Theft of the Thirty-Nine Girdles (Saturn Science Fiction and Fantasy, March 1958)

The Poseidonis Stories



Poseidonis is the fictional last remnant of the lost continent of Atlantis, first mentioned by Algernon Blackwood in his short story *Sand* (1912). Smith based his Poseidonis series of stories on Theosophical scriptures about Atlantis.

The Muse of Atlantis (prose poem) (Poseidonis, 1973)

The Last Incantation (Lost Worlds, 1944)

The Death of Malygris (Weird Tales, April 1934)

Tolometh (poetry) (Spells and Philtres, 1958)

The Double Shadow (The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies, 1933)

A Voyage to Sfanomoë (Weird Tales, August 1931)

A Vintage from Atlantis (The Abominations of Yondo, 1960)

Atlantis (poetry) (The Star-Treader and Other Poems, 1912)

The Zothique Tales



This cycle of tales is set on the Earth's last continent in a far distant future. Zothique comprises Asia Minor, Arabia, Persia, India, parts of northern and eastern Africa, and much of the Indonesian archipelago. A new Australia exists somewhere to the south. To the west, there are only a few known islands, such as Naat, in which cannibals survive. To the north, are immense unexplored deserts; to the east, an enormous and unvoyaged sea. The science and machinery of present civilisation has long been forgotten, together with present religions, though many gods are worshipped; and sorcery and demonism prevail as in ancient days.

Zothique (poetry) (The Dark Chateau and Other Poems, 1951)

Xeethra (Weird Tales, December 1934)

Necromancy in Naat (Weird Tales, July 1936)

The Empire of the Necromancers (Weird Tales, September 1932)

The Master of the Crabs (Weird Tales, March 1948)

The Death of Ilalotha (Weird Tales, September 1937)

The Weaver in the Vault (Genius Loci and Other Tales, 1948)

The Witchcraft of Ulua (Weird Tales, February 1934)

The Charnel God (Weird Tales, March 1934)

The Dark Eidolon (Weird Tales, January 1935)

Morthylla (Weird Tales, May 1953)

The Black Abbot of Puthuum (Weird Tales, March 1936)

The Tomb-Spawn (Weird Tales, May 1934)

The Last Hieroglyph (Weird Tales, April 1935)

The Isle of the Torturers (Keep on the Light, Selwyn & Blount, 1933)

The Garden of Adompha (Weird Tales, April 1938)

The Voyage of King Euvoran (The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies, 1933)

The Mars Cycle



This cycle of science-fiction tales takes place on a human-colonised Mars, involving ancient horrors from its primordial past...

[*Seedling of Mars*](#) (Wonder Stories Quarterly, Fall 1931)

[*The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis*](#) (Weird Tales, May 1932)

[*The Dweller in the Gulf*](#) (Wonder Stories, March 1933)

[*Vulthoom*](#) (Weird Tales, September 1935)

The Xiccarph Chronicles



This unfinished series of tales is situated on the mysterious planet of Xiccarph, which has four small moons and rotates around a triple sun, giving it a short night. The civilisations of Xiccarph function at a tribal level, employing Iron Age technology, with the exception of the master wizard Maal Dweb, who rules over all the planet's kings with his superior knowledge.

[*The Maze of the Enchanter*](#) (The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies”
Auburn Journal 1933)

Edited version: [*The Maze of Maal Dweb*](#) (Weird Tales, September 1938)

[*The Flower-Women*](#) (Weird Tales, May 1935)

The Short Story Collections



Long Valley, Placer County, California — Clark Ashton Smith's birthplace



Smith as a young man, c. 1912

The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies (1933)



The master of Weird fiction, Clark Ashton Smith was born 13 January 1893, in Long Valley, California, into a family of English and New England heritage. For the majority of his life, he lived in the small town of Auburn in a cabin built by his parents, Fanny and Timeus Smith. Although in later years he declared his frustration with the town's provincial nature, he rarely left its confines until he married late in life.

Smith had a very limited education, as he suffered from psychological disorders, including intense agoraphobia. Although he had been accepted at high school after attending eight years of grammar school, his parents decided he should be taught at home instead. From an early age, he was an insatiable reader, who displayed an extraordinary eidetic memory, allowing him to retain an extraordinary breadth of information. After completing his education, he embarked on a self-directed course of literature, including reading prominent classics such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, *The Arabian Nights* and the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe. He also reportedly read the entire unabridged 13th edition of Webster's Dictionary, word for word, studying not only the definitions of words, but also their precise etymology. He also set himself the gargantuan task of reading the complete 11th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* at least twice. Later, he also taught himself French and Spanish so that he could translate verse out of those languages, including the works of Charles Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, Paul Verlaine, Amado Nervo and Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer.

When he was eleven, he produced his first literary efforts, taking the form of fairy tales and imitations of *The Arabian Nights*. From there, he evolved to writing long adventure stories, dealing with Oriental life. By the age of fourteen, he had already written a short adventure novel titled *The Black Diamonds*, which remained lost for many years until finally published in 2002. At seventeen, he had sold several stories to *The Black Cat*, a magazine specialising in unusual tales. He also published tales in the *Overland Monthly* in a brief foray into fiction, which preceded his poetic career.

After a long period of composing and publishing poetry collections, Smith eventually turned back to the slightly more lucrative field of short fiction. It was the beginning of the Depression in 1929, when his aged parents' health was quickly deteriorating, that Smith decided to resume his story writing to provide much needed funds quickly. During the frenetic period of 1929 and 1934, he produced more than one hundred short stories, most of which are identified now as belonging to the Weird horror/science fiction genre. Like his friend and associate H. P. Lovecraft, he drew upon the nightmares that had troubled him during youthful spells of sickness. The resulting stories have been described by some critics as one of the most remarkable feats in imaginative literature.

Smith took the daring decision to publish at his own expense a volume containing six of his best Weird stories, entitled *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies*, in an edition of 1,000 copies, printed by the *Auburn Journal*. The theme of much of these tales is egotism and its eventual and supernatural punishment. Generally macabre in subject matter, his tales are rich in descriptive detail and are often preoccupied with images of death, decay and abnormality.

The majority of his Weird fiction falls into four series, set in either Hyperborea, Poseidonis, Averaigne and Zothique. Hyperborea is a lost continent of the Miocene period, while Poseidonis, a remnant of Atlantis, features much of the same ingredients, with a magical culture characterised by the fey, cruelty, death and other horrors. Averaigne is Smith's version of pre-modern France, similar in many ways to James Branch Cabell's *Poictesme*. Zothique is a setting that exists millions of years in the future, described as being "the last continent of earth, when the sun is dim and tarnished".

The
DOUBLE SHADOW
and
OTHER FANTASIES



BY
CLARK ASHTON SMITH

The first edition of 1000 copies, printed in grey wrappers, with 30 pages, by Auburn Press, 1933

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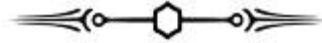
The Double Shadow

A Night in Malnéant

The Devotee of Evil

The Willow Landscape

The Voyage of King Euvoran



THE CROWN OF the kings of Ustaim was fashioned only from the rarest materials that could be procured anywhere. The magically graven gold of its circlet had been mined from a huge meteor that fell in the southern isle of Cyntrom, shaking the isle from shore to shore with calamitous earthquake; and the gold was harder and brighter than any native gold of Earth, and was changeable in color from a flamelike red to the yellow of young moons. It was set with thirteen jewels, every one of which was unique and without fellow even in fable. These jewels were a wonder to behold, starring the circlet with strange unquiet fires and fulgurations terrible as the eyes of the cockatrice. But more wonderful than all else was the stuffed gazolba-bird which formed the superstructure of the crown, gripping the circlet with its steely claws above the wearer's brow, and towering royally with resplendent plumage of green, violet and vermilion. Its beak was the hue of burnished brass, its eyes were like small dark garnets in bezels of silver; and seven lacy, miniated quills arose from its ebon-dappled head, and a white tail fell down in a straightly spreading fan like the beams of some white sun behind the circle. The gazolba-bird was the last of its kind, according to the mariners who had slain it in an almost legendary isle beyond Sotar, far to the east of Zothique. For nine generations it had decked the crown of Ustaim, and the kings looked upon it as the sacred emblem of their fortunes, and a talisman inseparable from their royalty, whose loss would be followed by grave disaster.

Euvoran the son of Karpoom, was the ninth wearer of the crown. Superbly and magnificently he had worn it for two years and ten months, following the death of Karpoom from a surfeit of stuffed eels and jellied salamander's eggs. On all state occasions, levees and daily grantings of public audience and administerings of justice, it had graced the brow of the young king and had conferred upon him a dreadful majesty in the eyes of the beholders. Also, it had served to conceal the lamentable increase of an early baldness.

It came to pass, in the late autumn of the third year of his reign, that King Euvoran rose from a goodly breakfast of twelve courses and twelve wines, and went forth as was his custom to the hall of justice, which occupied an entire wing of his palace in the city of Aramoam, looking down in several-colored marble from its palmy hills to the rippled lazuli of the orient ocean.

Being well fortified by his breakfast, Euvoran felt himself prepared to unravel the most involute skeins of legality and crime, and was likewise ready for the meting of swift punishment to all malefactors. And beside him, at the right arm of his kraken-sculptured throne of ivory, there stood an executioner leaning on a huge mace with a leaden head that was tempered to the hardness of iron. Full often, with this mace, the bones of the more flagitious offenders were broken immediately, or their brains were split in the king's presence on a floor that was strewn with black sand. And beside the left arm of the throne, a professional torturer busied himself continually with the screws and pulleys of certain fearsome instruments of torture, as a warning of their fate to all evil-doers. And not always idle were the turnings of these screws and the tightenings of these pulleys, and not always empty were the metal beds of the machines.

Now, on that morning, the constables of the city brought before King Euvoran only a few petty thieves and suspicious vagrants; and there were no cases of felony such as would have warranted the wielding of the mace or the use of the torture-implements. So the king, who had looked forward to a pleasurable session, was somewhat balked and disappointed; and he questioned with much severity the minor culprits before him, trying to extort from each of them, in turn, an admission of some graver crime than that whereof he was accused. But it seemed that the pilferers were innocent of aught but pilfering; and the vagrants were guilty of naught worse than vagrancy; and Euvoran began to think that the morning would offer scant entertainment. For the bastinado was the heaviest punishment that he could legally impose on such misdemeanants.

“Away with these mackerel!” he roared to the officers, and his crown shook with indignation, and the tall gazolba-bird on the crown appeared to nod and bow. “Away with them, for they pollute my presence. Give each of them a hundred strokes with the hardwood briar on the bare sole of each foot, and forget not the heels. Then drive them forth from Aramoam toward the public refuse-grounds, and prod them with red-hot tridents if they linger in their crawling.”

Then, ere the officers could obey him, there entered the hall of justice two belated constables, haling between them a peculiar and most unsavory individual with the long-handled, many pointed hooks that were used in Aramoam for the apprehending of malefactors and suspects. And though the hooks were seemingly embedded in his flesh as well as the filthy rags that served him for raiment, the prisoner bounded perpetually aloft in the manner of a goat, and his captors were obliged to follow in these lively and undignified saltations, so that the three presented the appearance of tumblers. With a final volitation in which the officers were drawn through

the air like the tails of a kite, the incredible personage came to a pause before Euvoran. The king regarded him in amazement, blinking rapidly, and was not prepossessed by the singular suppleness with which he louted to the very floor, upsetting the scarce-recovered equilibrium of the officers, and causing them to sprawl at full length in the royal presence.

“Ha! What have we now?” said the king in an ominous voice.

“Sire, ’tis another vagabond,” replied the breathless officers, when they had regained a more respectfully inclined position. “He would have passed through Aramoam by the main avenue in the fashion that you behold, without stopping, and without even lessening the altitude of his saltations, if we had not arrested him.”

“Such behavior is highly suspicious,” growled Euvoran hopefully. “Prisoner, declare your name, your nativity and occupation, and the infamous crimes of which, beyond doubt, you are guilty.”

The captive, who was cross-eyed, appeared to regard Euvoran, the royal mace-wielder, and the royal torturer and his instruments all in a single glance. He was ill-favored to an extravagant degree, his nose, ears and other features were all possessed of unnatural mobility, and he grimaced perpetually in a manner that caused his unclean beard to toss and curl like seaweed on a boiling whirlpool.

“I have many names,” he replied, in an insolent voice whose pitch was peculiarly disagreeable to Euvoran, setting his teeth on edge like the grating of metal on glass. “As for my nativity and occupation, the knowledge of these, O king, would profit you little.”

“Sirrah, you are malapert. Give answer or tongues of red-hot iron shall question you,” roared Euvoran.

“Be it known to you, then, that I am a necromancer, and was born in the realm where the dawn and the sunset come together and the moon is equal

in brightness to the sun.”

“Ha! A necromancer!” snorted the king. “Know you not that necromancy is a capital crime in Ustaim? Verily, we shall find means to dissuade you from the practice of such infamies.”

At a sign from Euvoran, the officers drew their captive toward the instruments of torture. Much to their surprise, in view of his former ebullience, he allowed himself to be chained supinely on the iron bed that produced a remarkable elongation of the limbs of its occupants. The official engineer of these miracles began to work the levers, and the bed lengthened little by little with a surly grating, till it seemed that the prisoner’s joints would be torn apart. Inch by inch was added to his stature; and though, after a time, he had gained more than a half-cubit from the stretching, he appeared to experience no discomfort whatever; and to the stupefaction of all present, it became plain that the elasticity of his arms, legs and body was beyond the extensibility of the rack itself; for the latter was now drawn to its limits.

All were silent, viewing this prodigy; and Euvoran rose from his seat and went over to the rack, as if doubtful of his own eyes that testified to a thing so enormous. And the prisoner said to him:

“It were well to release me, O King Euvoran.”

“Say you so?” the king cried out in a rage. “However, it is not thus that we deal with felons in Ustaim.” And he made a private sign to the executioner, who came forward quickly, rearing his massive, leaden-headed mace aloft.

“On your own head be it,” said the necromancer, and he rose instantly from the iron bed, breaking the bonds that held him, as if they had been chains of grass. Then, towering to a terrible height, which the wrenchings of the rack had given him, he pointed his long forefinger, dark and sere as that

of a mummy, at the king's crown; and simultaneously he uttered a foreign word that was shrill and eldritch as the crying of migrant fowl that pass over toward unknown shores in the night. And lo! As if in answer to that word, there was a loud, sudden flapping of wings above Euvoran's head and the king felt that his brow was lightened by the crown's goodly and well-accustomed weight. A shadow fell upon him, and he, and all who were present, beheld above them in the air the stuffed gazolba-bird, which had been slain more than two hundred years before by sea-faring men in a remote isle. The wings of the bird, a living splendor, were outspread as if for flight, and it carried still in its steely claws the rare circlet of the crown. Librating, it hung for a little over the throne, while the king watched it in wordless awe and consternation. Then, with metallic whirring, its white tail deployed like the beams of a flying sun, it flew swiftly through the open portals, and passed seaward from Aramoam into the morning light.

After it, with great bounds and goatish leapings, the necromancer followed; and no man tried to deter him. But those who saw him depart from the city swore that he went north along the ocean-strand, while the bird flew directly eastward, as if homing to the half-fabulous isle of its nativity. Thereafter, as if he had gone at a single bound into alien realms, the necromancer was not seen in Ustaim. But the crew of a merchant galley from Sotar, landing later in Aramoam, told how the gazolba-bird had passed over them in mid-main, a several-colored glory still flying toward the sources of the dayspring. And they said that the crown of changeable gold, with its thirteen fellowless gems, was still carried by the bird. And though they had trafficked long in the archipelagoes of wonder, and had seen many prodigies, they deemed this thing a most rare and unexampled portent.

King Euvoran, so strangely reft of that avian head-gear, with his baldness rudely bared to the gaze of thieves and vagrants in the hall of justice, was as

one on whom the gods have sent down a sudden bolt. If the sun had turned black in heaven, or his palace walls had crumbled about him, his dumbfoundment would hardly have been more excessive. For it seemed to him that his royalty had flown with that crown which was the emblem and the talisman of his fathers. And, moreover, the thing was wholly against nature, and the laws of god and man were annulled thereby: since never before, in all history or fable, had a dead bird taken flight from the kingdom of Ustaim.

Indeed, the loss was a dire calamity, and Euvoran, having donned a voluminous turban of purple samite, held council with the sagest ministers regarding the state dilemma that had thus arisen. The ministers were no less troubled and perplexed than the king: for the bird and the circlet were both irreplaceable. And in the meanwhile, the rumor of this misfortune was borne abroad through Ustaim, and the land became filled with lamentable doubt and confusion, and some of the people began to murmur covertly against Euvoran, saying that no man could be the rightful ruler of that country without the gazolba-crown.

Then, as was the custom of the kings in a time of national exigence, Eurovan repaired to the temple in which dwelt the god Geol, who was a terrestrial god and the chief deity of Aramoam. Alone, with bare head and unshod feet, as was ordained by hierarchal law, he entered the dim adytum where the image of Geol, pot-bellied, and wrought of earth-brown faience, reclined eternally on its back and regarded the motes in a narrow beam of sunlight from the slotted wall. And, falling prone in the dust that had gathered around the idol through ages, the king gave homage to Geol, and implored an oracle to illuminate and guide him in his need. And after an interim, a voice issued from the god's navel, as if a subterrene rumbling had become articulate. And the voice said to King Eurovan:

“Go forth and seek the gazolba in those isles that lie beneath the orient sun. There, O king, on the far coasts of dawn, thou shalt again behold the living bird which is the symbol and the fortune of thy dynasty; and there, with thine own hand, thou shalt slay the bird.”

Euvoran was much comforted by this oracle, since the utterances of the god were deemed infallible. And it seemed to him that the oracle implied in plain terms that he should recover the lost crown of Ustaim, which had the reanimated bird for its superstructure. So, returning to the royal palace, he sent for the captains of his proudest argosies of war, which lay then at anchor in the tranquil harbor of Aramoam, and ordered them to make immediate provision for a long voyage into the east and among the archipelagoes of morning.

When all was made ready, King Euvoran went aboard the flagship of the fleet, which was a towering quadrireme with oars of beef-wood and sails of stout woven byssus dyed in yellowish scarlet, and a long gonfalon at the mast head, bearing the gazolba bird in its natural colors on a field of heavenly cobalt. The rowers and sailors of the quadrireme were mighty Negroes from the north; and the soldiers who manned it were fierce mercenaries from Xylac in the west; and with him, going aboard, the king took certain of his concubines and jesters and other ministrants, as well as an ample store of liquors and rare viands, so that he should lack for nothing during the voyage. And mindful of the prophecy of Geol, the king armed himself with a longbow and a quiver filled with parrot-feathered arrows; and he also carried a sling of lion-leather and a blowgun of black bamboo from which tiny poisoned darts were discharged.

It seemed that the gods favored the voyage; for a wind blew strongly from the west on the morning of the departure; and the fleet, which numbered fifteen vessels, was borne with bellying sails toward the sea-risen

sun. And the farewell clamors and shoutings of Euvoran's people on the wharves were soon stilled by distance; and the marble houses of Aramoam on its four palmy hills here drowned in that swiftly foundering bank of azure which was the shoreline of Ustaim. And, thereafter, for many days, the iron-wood beaks of the galleys clove a softly weltering sea of indigo that rose unbroken on all sides to a cloudless, dark-blue heaven.

Trusting in the oracle of Geol, that earthen god who had never failed his fathers, the king made merry as was his wont; and reclining beneath a saffron canopy on the poop of the quadrireme, he swilled from an emerald beaker the wines and brandies that had lain in his palace-vaults, storing the warmth of elder, ardent suns whereon oblivion's black rime was fallen. And he laughed at the ribaldries of his fools, at unquenchable ancient bawdries that had won the laughter of other kings in the sea-lost continents of yore. And his women diverted him with harlotries that were older than Rome or Atlantis. And ever he kept at hand, beside his couch, the weapons wherewith he hoped to hunt and slay again the gazolba-bird, according to the oracle of Geol.

The winds were unfailing and auspicious, and the fleet sped onward, with the great black oarsmen singing gaily at their oars, and the gorgeous sailcloths flapping loudly, and the long banners floating on the air like straight-blown flames. After a fortnight they came to Sotar, whose low-lying coasts of cassia and sago barred the sea for a hundred leagues from north to south; and in Loithe, the chief port, they paused to inquire for the gazolba-bird. There were rumors that the bird had passed above Sotar; and some of the people said that a cunning sorcerer of that isle, named Iffibos, had drawn it down through his sorcery and had closed it in a cage of sandalwood. So the king landed in Loithe, deeming his quest perhaps already nigh to its end, and went with certain of his captains and soldiers to

visit Iffibos, who dwelt in a retired vale among the mountains at the island's core.

It was a tedious journey, and Euvoran was much annoyed by the huge and vicious gnats of Sotar, which were no respecters of royalty, and were always insinuating themselves under his turban. And when, after some delay and divagation in the deep jungle, he came to the house of Iffibos on a high, precarious crag, he found that the bird was merely one of the bright-plumaged vultures peculiar to the region, which Iffibos had tamed for his own amusement. So the king returned to Loithe, after declining somewhat rudely the invitation of the sorcerer, who wished to show him the unusual feats of falconry to which he had trained the vulture. And in Loithe the king tarried no longer than was needful for the laying aboard of fifty jars of the sovereign arrack in which Sotar excels all other lands.

Then, coasting the southern cliffs and promontories, where the sea bellowed prodigiously in mile-deep caverns, the ships of Euvoran sailed beyond Sotar, and Tosk, whose people were more akin to apes and lemurs than to men. And Euvoran asked the people for news of the gazolba, and received only a chattering as of apes in answer. So the king ordered his men-at-arms to catch a number of these savage islanders and crucify them on the coco-palms for their incivility. And the men-at-arms pursued the nimble people of Tosk for a full day among the trees and boulders in which the isle abounded, but without catching a single one of them. So the king contented himself by crucifying several of the men-at-arms for their failure to obey him and sailed on to the seven atolls of Yumatot, whose inhabitants were mostly cannibals. And beyond Yumatot, which was the usual limit of eastern voyaging from Ustaim, the vessels entered the Ilozian Sea, and began to touch at partly mythic shores and islands charted only in story.

It were tedious to relate the full particulars of that voyage, in which Euvoran and his captains went ever toward the sources of the dawn. Various and without number were the strange marvels they found in the archipelagoes beyond Yumatot; but nowhere could they find a single feather such as had formed part of the gazolba's plumage; and the quaint people of those isles had never seen the bird.

Howbeit, the king beheld many a flock of unknown, fiery-winged fowl that went over the galleys in mid-sea, passing between the unmarked islets. And, landing often, he practiced his archery on lorikeets and lyrebirds and boobies, or stalked the golden cockatoos with his blowgun. And he chased the dodo and dinornis on shores that were otherwise unpeopled. And once, in a sea of high-beetling barren rocks, the fleet was assailed by mighty griffins that flew down from their crag-built eyries, with wings shining like feathery brass under the meridian sun, and making a harsh clangor as of shields shaken in battle. And the griffins, being both ferocious and pertinacious, were driven away with much difficulty by boulders hurled from the catapults of the vessels.

Everywhere, as the ships drove eastward, there were multitudes of fowl. But at the sunset of a day in the fourth moon following their departure from Aramoam, the vessels approached a nameless isle that towered mile-high with cliffs of black, naked basalt, around whose base the sea cried with baffled anger, and about whose precipices there were no wings nor voices of birds. The isle was topped with gnarly cypresses that might have grown in a windy graveyard; and sullenly it took the afterglow, as if drenched with a gore of darkening blood. Far up in the cliffs there were strange columned eaves like the dwellings of forgotten troglodytes, but seemingly inaccessible to men; and the caves to all appearances were unoccupied by any kind of life, though pitting the face of the isle for leagues. And Euvoran ordered his

captains to drop anchor, meaning to search for a landing-place on the morrow: since, in his anxiety to retrieve the gazolba, he would pass no isle of the dawnward main, not even the unlikeliest, without due inquiry and examination.

Quickly fell the darkness, without moon, till the close-anchored ships were visible to each other only by their lanterns. And Euvoran sat at supper in his cabin, sipping the golden arrack of Sotar between mouthfuls of mango-jelly and phenicopter's meat. And, saving a small watch on each of the vessels, the sailors and men-at-arms were all at evening mess; and the rowers ate their figs and lentils in the oar-decks. Then, from the watches, there was a wild shouting of alarm, and the shouting ceased in a moment, and each of the vessels rocked and sagged in the water, as if a monstrous weight had settled upon it. No man knew the thing that had happened, but everywhere there was turmoil and confusion, some saying that the fleet was attacked by pirates. Those who peered from the ports and oar-holes saw that the lanterns of their neighbors had been quenched, and perceived a milling and seething as of low-driven clouds in the darkness, and saw that foul black creatures, large as men and winged like oupires, were clinging to the ranged oars in myriads. And those who dared to approach the open hatches found that the decks, the rigging and the masts were crowded with similar creatures, who, it seemed, were of nocturnal habit and had come down in the manner of bats from their caves in the island.

Then, like things of nightmare, the monsters began to invade the hatches and assail the ports, clawing with hellish talons at the men who opposed them. And, being somewhat hampered by their wings, they were driven back with spears and arrows, but returned again and again in a thickening press without number, cheeping with a faint and bat-like sound. It was plain that they were vampires, for whenever they had dragged a man down, as

many of them as could gain mouthhold would fasten on him incontinently, and suck his blood till little more remained than a skinful of bones. The upper oar-decks, being half open to the sky, were quickly usurped, and their crews overcome with a hideous swarming; and the rowers in the orlops cried that the sea-water was pouring in through the oar-holes as the ships sank deeper beneath an ever-gathering weight.

All night, at the ports and hatches, the men of Euvoran fought the vampires, taking turns in shifts when they wearied. Many of them were seized and their blood sucked before the eyes of their fellows as the night wore on; and the vampires, it seemed, were not to be slain by mortal weapons, though the blood they had gorged came forth in spouting rills from their wounded bodies. And thicklier they clustered upon the fleet, till the biremes began to founder, and the rowers were drowned in the sunken lower decks of certain triremes and quadriremes.

King Euvoran was wroth at this unseemly turmoil that had interrupted his supper; and when the golden arrack was spilt and the dishes of rare meat were emptied on the floor by the vessel's violent rocking, he would have issued from his cabin, fully armed, to try conclusions with these piacular miscreants. But, even as he turned to fling wide the cabin-door, there was a soft infernal pittering at the port-holes behind him; and the women who were with him began to shriek, and the fools cried out in terror. And the king saw in the lamplight a grisly face with the teeth and nostrils of a flittermouse, that leaned in through one of the cabin-ports. He sought to repel the face, and thereafter, till dawn, he fought the vampires with those very weapons he had designed for the slaying of the gazolba; and the ship's captain, who was with him at supper, guarded a second port with his claymore; and the others were held by two of the king's eunuchs, armed with scimitars. In this warfare they were favored by the smallness of the

ports, which could hardly in any case have allowed the free passage of their winged assailants. And, after lightless hours of tedious, horrid struggle, the darkness became thinned with brown twilight, and the vampires lifted from the vessels in a black cloud and returned to their caves in the mile-high cliffs of that unnamed island.

Heavy was the heart of Euvoran within him when he surveyed the damage done to his proud argosies of war: for, among the fifteen vessels, seven had sunk in the night, borne under and swamped by those obscenely clinging hordes of oupires; and the decks of the others were bloody as abbatoirs; and half of the sailors and rowers and men-at-arms were lying flat and flaccid as empty wineskins after the greedy drinking of the great bats. And the sails and banners were shredded into rags; and everywhere, from beak to rudder of Euvoran's galleys, there was the stain and reek of a Stymphalian foulness. So, lest another eve should find them within wing-shot of that accursed isle, the king ordered his remaining captains to weigh anchor; and the other ships, with sea-water still awash in their orlops, and some with drowned rowers still at the oars of their nether banks, drew slowly and heavily to eastward, till the pitted walls of the isle began to sink beneath the main. At eve there was no land in sight anywhere; and after two days, still unharried by the vampires, they came to a coral island, low in the wave, with a calm lagoon that was haunted only by ocean-fowl. And there, for the first time, Euvoran paused to repair his tattered sails, and pump the sea from his holds, and clean the blood and vileness from his decks.

However, in spite of this disaster, the king abated not in any degree his purpose, to sail ever on toward the fountains of the day, until, as Geol had predicted, he should come again on the flown gazolba and slay it with his own royal hand. So, for another moon, they passed amid other and stranger archipelagoes, and penetrated deeplier into the regions of myth and story.

Bravely they drove into mornings of amaranth crossed by gilded lories, and noontides of darkly ardent sapphire where the rose flamingoes went before them to lost, inviolate strands. The stars changed above them, and under the alien-figured Signs they heard the wild, melancholy crying of swans that flew southward fleeing the winter of realms indiscoverable, and seeking the summer in trackless worlds. And they held speech with fabulous men who wore for mantles the ell-wide pennons of the roc, trailing far on the earth behind them; and men who arrayed themselves in apyornis plumes. And they spoke also with antic people whose bodies were covered with a down like that of a new-hatched fowl, and others whose flesh was studded as if with pin-feathers. But nowhere could they learn aught of the gazolba.

At mid-forenoon, early in the sixth month of the voyage, a new and unheard-of shore ascended from the deep, curving for many miles, from northeast to southwest, with sheltered harbors, and cliffs and pinnacled crags that were interspaced with low-lying verdurous dales. As the galleys hove toward it, Euvoran and his captains saw that towers were builded on certain of the highmost crags; but in the haven below them there were no ships at anchor nor boats moving; and the shore of the haven was a wilderness of green trees and grass. And, sailing still nearer, and entering the harbor, they descried no evident sign of man, other than the crag-reared towers.

The place, however, was full of an extraordinary number and variety of birds, ranging in size from little tits and passerines to creatures of greater wingspread than eagle or condor. They circled the ships in covoyes and great, motley flocks, seeming to be both curious and wary; and Euvoran saw that a winged concourse, as it were, went to and fro above the woods and about the cliffs and towers. He bethought him that here was a likely

haunt in which to track down the gazolba; so, arming himself for the chase, he went ashore in a small boat with several of his men.

The birds, even the largest, were patently timid and inoffensive; for when the king landed on the beach, the very trees appeared to take flight, so numerous were the fowl that soared and flew inland, or sought the crags and pinnacles that rose beyond bow-shot. None remained of the multitude visible shortly before; and Euvoran marvelled at such cunning; and moreover he was somewhat exasperated, for he wished not to depart without bringing down a trophy of his skill, even though he should fail to find the gazolba itself. And he deemed the behavior of the birds all the more curious because of the island's solitude: for here there were no paths other than would be made by forest animals; and the woods and meadows were wholly wild and incult; and the towers were seemingly desolate, with sea-fowl and land-fowl flying in and out of their empty windows.

The king and his men combed the deserted woods along the shore, and came to a steep slope of bushes and dwarf cedars, whose upper incline approached the tallest tower at one side. Here, at the slope's bottom, Euvoran saw a small owl that slept in one of the cedars, as if wholly unaware of the commotion made by the other birds in their flight. And Euvoran trained an arrow and shot down the owl, though ordinarily he would have spared a prey so paltry. And he was about to pick up the fallen owl, when one of the men who accompanied him cried out as if in alarm. Then, turning his head as he stooped beneath the foliage of the cedar, the king beheld a brace of colossal birds, larger than any he had yet descried on that isle, who came down from the tower like falling thunderbolts. Before he could fit another arrow to the string, they were upon him with the drumming of their mighty vans, and beating him instantly to the ground, so that he was aware of them only as a storm of dreadfully rushing plumes and

a hurlyburly of cruel beaks and talons. And, before his men could rally to assist him, one of the birds fastened its huge claws in the shoulder-cape of the king's mantle, not sparing the flesh beneath in its fell clutch, and carried him away to the tower on the crag as easily as a ger-falcon would have carried a small leveret. The king was wholly helpless, and he had dropped his longbow beneath the onset of the birds, and his blowgun had been shaken loose from the girdle at which it depended, and all his darts and arrows were spilled. And he had no weapon remaining, other than a sharp misericordia; and this he could not use to any purpose against his captor in mid-air.

Swiftly he neared the tower, with a flock of lesser fowl circling about him and shrieking as if with derision till he was deafened by their din. And a sickness came upon him because of the height to which he had been carried and the violence of his ascent; and giddily he saw the walls of the tower sink past him with wide and portal-like windows. Then, as he began to retch in his sickness, he was borne in through one of the windows and was dropped rudely on the floor of a high and spacious chamber.

He sprawled at full length on his face and lay vomiting for awhile, heedless of his surroundings. Then, recovering somewhat, he raised himself to a sitting position, and beheld before him, above a sort of dais, an enormous perch of red gold and yellow ivory wrought in the form of a new crescent arching upward. The perch was supported between posts of black jasper flecked as if with blood, and upon it there sat a most gigantic and uncommon bird, eyeing Euvoran with a grim and dreadful and austere mien, as an emperor might eye the gutter-scum that his guards have haled before him for some obscene offense. The plumage of the bird was Tyrian purple, and his beak was like a mighty pick-ax of pale bronze that darkened greenly toward the point, and he clutched the perch with iron talons that

were longer than the mailed fingers of a warrior. His head was adorned with quills of turquoise blue and amber yellow, like many a pointed crown; and about his long, unfeathered throat, rough as the scaled skin of a dragon, he wore a singular necklace composed of human heads, and the heads of various ferine beasts such as the weasel, the wildcat, the stoat and the fox, all of which had been reduced to a common size and were no larger than groundnuts.

Euvoran was terrified by the aspect of this fowl; and his alarm was not lessened when he saw that many other birds of a size inferior only to his were sitting about the chamber on less costly and less elevated perches, even as grandees of the realm might sit in the presence of their sovereign. And behind Euvoran, like guards, there stood together with its fellow the creatures that had rapt him to the tower.

Now, adding to his utter confounding, the great Tyrian-feathered bird addressed him in human speech. And the bird said to him in a harsh but magniloquent and majestic voice:

“Too hardily, O filth of mankind, thou hast intruded on the peace of Ornavia, isle that is sacred to the birds, and wantonly thou hast slain one of my subjects. For know that I am the monarch of all birds that fly, walk, wade or swim on this terraqueous globe of Earth; and in Ornavia is my seat and my capital. Verily, justice shall be done upon thee for thy crime. But if thou hast aught to say in thy defence, I will give thee hearing now, for I would not that even the vilest of earthly vermin, and the most pernicious, should accuse me of inequity or tyranny.”

Then, blustering somewhat, though sorely afraid at heart, Euvoran gave answer to the bird, and said:

“I came hither seeking the gazolba, which adorned my crown in Ustaim, and was feloniously reft from me together with the crown through the spell

of a lawless necromancer. And know that I am Euvoran, King of Ustaim, and I bow me to no bird, not even the mightiest of that species.”

Thereat the ruler of the birds, as if amazed and more indignant than before, made question of Euvoran and interrogated him sharply concerning the gazolba. And, learning that this bird had been slain by sailors and afterwards stuffed, and that the whole purpose of Euvoran in his voyage was to catch and kill it a second time and re-stuff it if necessary, the ruler cried in a great and wrathful voice:

“This helpeth not thy case but showeth thee guilty of a twofold and a triple infamy: for thou hast owned a most abominable thing and one that subverteth nature. In this my tower, as is right and proper, I keep the bodies of men that my taxidermists have stuffed for me; but truly, it is not allowable nor sufferable that man should do thus to birds. So, for the sake of justice and retribution, I shall presently commit thee to one of my taxidermists. Indeed, methinks that a stuffed king (since even the vermin have kings) will serve to enhance my collection.”

After that, he addressed Euvoran’s guards and enjoined them: “Away with this vileness. Confine it to the man-cage, and maintain a strict watch before it.”

Euvoran, urged and directed by the pecking of his guards, was compelled to climb a sort of sloping ladder with broad rungs of teak, that led from the chamber to one above it in the tower’s top. In the center of this room there was a bamboo cage of capacity more than ample for the housing of six men. The king was driven into the cage, and the birds bolted the door upon him with their claws, which seemed to have the deftness of fingers. Thereafter one of them remained by the cage, eyeing Euvoran vigilantly through the spaces of the bars; and the other flew away through a great window and did not return.

The king sat down on a litter of straw, since the cage contained no better provision for his comfort. Despair was heavy upon him, and it seemed that his plight was both dreadful and ignominious. And sorely was he astonished, that a bird should speak with human speech, insulting and reviling humankind; and he deemed it an equally monstrous thing that a bird should dwell in royal state, with servitors to do his will, and the pomp and power of a king. And, pondering these unholy prodigies, Euvoran waited for his doom in the man-cage; and after awhile, water and raw grain were brought to him in earthen vessels; but he could not eat the grain. And still later, as the day drew toward afternoon, he heard a shouting of men and a shrieking of birds below the tower; and above these noises, anon, there were clashings as of weapons and thuddings as of boulders loosened from the crag. So Euvoran knew that his sailors and soldiers, having seen him borne into captivity in the tower, were assailing the place in an effort to succor him. And the noises waxed, mounting to a most tremendous and atrocious din, and there were cries as of people mortally wounded, and a vengeful shrilling as of harpies in battle. Then, presently, the clamor ebbed away, and the shoutings grew faint, and Euvoran knew that his men had failed to take the tower. And hope waned within him, dying in a darker murk of despair.

So the afternoon went over, declining seaward, and the sun touched Euvoran with its level beams through a western window and colored the bars of his cage with a mockery of gold. Presently, the light flowed from the room, and after awhile the twilight rose, weaving a tremulous phantom web of the pale air. And between the sunset and the darkness, a night-guard came in to relieve the day-flying owl who warded the captive king. The newcomer was a nyctalops with glowing yellow eyes, and he stood taller than Euvoran himself, and was formed and feathered somewhat in the burly

fashion of an owl, and he had the stout legs of a megapode. Euvoran was uncomfortably aware of the bird's eyes, which burned upon him with a brighter bale as the dusk deepened. Hardly could he sustain that ever vigilant scrutiny. But anon the moon rose, being but little past the full, and poured a spectral quicksilver into the room, and paled the eyes of the bird; and Euvoran conceived a desperate plan.

His captors, deeming all his weapons lost, had neglected to remove from his girdle the misericordia, which was long and double-edged and needle-sharp at the tip. And stealthily he gripped the hilt of his misericordia under his mantle, and feigned a sudden illness with groanings and tossings and convulsions that threw him against the bars. And, even as he had schemed, the great nyctalops came nearer, curious to learn what ailed the king; and stooping, he leaned his owl-like head between the bars above Euvoran. And the king, pretending a more violent convulsion, drew the misericordia from its sheath and struck quickly at the outstretched throat of the bird.

Shrewdly the thrust went home, piercing the deepest veins, and the squawking of the bird was choked by his own blood; and he fell, flapping noisily, so that Euvoran feared that all the occupants of the tower would be awakened by the sound. But it seemed that his fears were bootless; for none came to the chamber; and soon the flappings ceased, and the nyctalops lay still in a great heap of ruffled feathers. Thereupon the king proceeded with his plan, and shot back the bolts of the wide-latticed bamboo door with small difficulty. Then, going to the head of the teak-wood ladder which ran to the room beneath, he looked down and beheld the ruler of the birds asleep in the moonlight on his chryselephantine perch, with his terrible pick-ax beak under his wing. And Euvoran was afraid to descend into the chamber, lest the ruler should awake and see him. And also, it occurred to

him that the lower stories of the tower might well be guarded by such fowl as the nocturnal creature he had slain.

Again his despair returned upon him; but being of a sleightful and crafty bent, Euvoran bethought him of another scheme. With much labor, using the misericordia, he skinned the mighty nyctalops, and cleaned the blood from its plumage as best he could. Then Euvoran wrapped himself in the skin, with the head of the nyctalops rearing above his own head, and eyeholes in its burly throat through which he could look out amidst the feathers. And the skin fitted him well enough because of his pigeon-breast and his potbelly; and his spindle shanks were hidden behind the heavy shanks of the bird as he walked.

Then, imitating the gait and carriage of this fowl, the king descended the ladder, treading cautiously to avoid a fall and making little noise, lest the ruler of the birds should awaken and detect his imposture. And the ruler was all alone, and he slept without stirring while Euvoran reached the floor and crossed the chamber stealthily to another ladder, leading to the next room below.

In the next room there were many great birds asleep on perches, and the king was nigh to perishing with terror as he passed among them. Some of the birds moved a little and chirped drowsily, as if aware of his presence; but none challenged him. And he went down into a third room, and was startled to see therein the standing figures of many men, some in the garb of sailors, and others clad like merchants, and others nude and ruddled with bright ores like savages. And the men were still and stark as if enchanted; and the king feared them little less than he had feared the birds. But remembering that which the ruler had told him, he divined that these were persons who had been captured even as he himself, and had been slain by the birds and preserved through the art of an avian taxidermy. And,

trembling, he passed down to another room, which was full of stuffed cats and tigers and serpents and various other enemies of birdkind. And the room below this was the ground story of the tower, and its windows and portals by several gigantic night-fowl similar to those whose skin was worn by the king. Here, indeed, was his greatest peril and the supreme trial of his courage; for the birds eyed him alertly with their fiery golden orbs, and they greeted him with a soft whoo-whooping as of owls. And the knees of Euvoran knocked together behind the bird-shanks; but, imitating the sound in reply, he passed among the guards and was not molested by them. And, reaching an open portal of the tower, he saw the moonlight rock of the crag lying at a distance of no more than two cubits below him; and he hopped from the doorsill in the manner of a fowl, and found his way precariously from ledge to ledge along the crag, till he reached the upper beginning of that declivity at whose bottom he had slain the little owl. Here his descent was easier, and he came anon to the woods around the harbor.

But, ere he could enter the woods, there was a shrill singing of arrows about him, and the king was wounded slightly by one of the arrows, and he roared out in anger, and dropped the mantling birdskin. Thereby, no doubt, he was saved from death at the hands of his own men, who were coming through the woods with intent to assail the tower at night. And, learning this, the king forgave the jeopardy in which their arrows had placed him. But he thought it best to refrain from attacking the tower, and to quit the isle with all dispatch. So returning to his flagship, he ordered all his captains to set sail immediately; for, knowing the baleful power of the bird-monarch, he was more than apprehensive of pursuit; and he deemed it well to place a wide interval of sea between his vessels and that isle ere dawn. So the galleys drew from the tranquil harbor, and rounding a northeastern promontory, they went due east in a course contrary to the moon. And,

Euvoran, sitting in his cabin, regaled himself with a variety and plenitude of viands to make up for his fasting in the man-cage; and he drank a whole gallon of palm-wine and added thereto a jarful of the puissant pale-gold arrack of Sotar.

Halfway betwixt midnight and morn, when the isle of Ornava was left far behind, the steersmen of the vessels beheld a wall of ebon cloud that rose swiftly athwart the heavens, spreading and toppling in towers of thunder, till the storm overtook Euvoran's fleet and drove it on as if with the loosed hurricanes of hell through a welter of unstarred chaos. The ships were sundered in the gloom and were borne far apart; and at daybreak the king's quadrireme was alone in a prone-rushing tumult of mingled wave and cloud; and the mast was shattered, along with most of the beef-wood oars; and the vessel was a toy for the demons of the tempest.

For three days and nights, with no glimmer of sun or star discerned through the ever-boiling murk, the vessel was hurled onward as if caught in a cataract of elements pouring to some bottomless gulf beyond the fringes of the world. And early on the fourth day the clouds were somewhat riven; but a wind still blew like the breath of perdition. Then, lifting darkly through the spray and vapor, a half-seen land arose before the prow, and the helmsman and the rowers were wholly helpless to turn the doomed ship from its course. And shortly after, with a great crashing of its carven beak, and a terrible rending of timbers, the vessel struck on a low reef hidden by the flying foam, and its lower decks were flooded quickly. And the vessel began to founder, with the poop tilting sharply and more sharply, and the water frothing at the lee bulwarks.

Gaunt and cragged and austere was the shore beyond the reef, beheld only through the veils of the sea's foaming fury. And scant, it seemed, was the hope of reaching land. But, ere the wrecked argosy had gone beneath

him, Euvoran lashed himself with ropes of coir to an empty wine-barrel, and cast himself from the sloping deck. And those of his men who were not already drowned in the hold or swept overboard by the typhoon, leapt after him into that high wallowing sea, some trusting only to their might as swimmers and others clinging to casks or broken spars or planks. And most were drawn under in the seething maelstroms or were beaten to death on the rocks; and of all the ship's company, the king alone survived and was cast ashore with the breath of life unquenched within him by the bitter sea.

Half-drowned and senseless, he lay where the surf had spewed him on a shelving beach. Soon the gale forgot its violence, and the billows came in with falling crests, and the clouds went over in a rack of pearl, and the sun, climbing above the rock, shone down upon Euvoran from a deep immaculate azure. And the king, still dazed from the buffeting rudeness of the sea, heard dimly and as if in a dream the shrilling of an unknown bird. Then, opening his eyes, he beheld betwixt himself and the sun, librating on spread wings, that various-colored glory of plumes and feathers which he knew as the gazolba. Crying again with a voice that was harsh and shrill as that of the peafowl, the bird hung above him for a moment, and then flew inland through a rift among the crags.

Forgetful of all his hardships and the loss of his proud galleys of war, the king unbound himself in haste from the empty barrel; and, rising giddily, he followed the bird. And, though he was now weaponless, it seemed to him that the fulfillment of the oracle of Geol was at hand. And hopefully he armed himself with a great cudgel of driftwood and gathered heavy pebbles from the beach as he pursued the gazolba.

Beyond the cleft in the high and rugged crags, he found a sheltered valley with quiet-flowing springs, and woods of exotic leaf, and fragrant orient shrubs in blossom. Here, from bough to bough before his astounded

eyes, there darted great numbers of fowl that wore the gaudy plumage of the gazolba; and among them he was unable to distinguish the one he had followed, deeming it the avian garniture of his lost crown. The multitude of these birds was a thing beyond his comprehension: since he and all his people had thought the stuffed fowl unique and fellowless throughout the world, even as the other components of the crown of Ustaim. And it came to him that his fathers had been deceived by the mariners who had slain the birds in a remote isle, swearing later that it was the last of its kind.

However, though wrath and confusion were in his heart, Euvoran bethought him that a single bird from the flock would still stand as the emblem and the talisman of his royalty in Ustaim, and would vindicate his quest among the isles of dawn. So, with a valiant hurling of sticks and stones, he tried to bring down one of the gazolbas. And ever before him as he chased them, the birds flew from tree to tree with a horrid shrieking, and a flurry of plumes that wrought an imperial splendor on the air. And at length, by his own good aim or the cast of chance, Euvoran slew him a gazolba.

As he went to retrieve the fallen bird, he saw a man in tattered raiment of an uncouth cut, armed with a rude bow, and carrying over his shoulder a brace of gazolbas tied together at the feet with tough grass. And the man wore in lieu of other headgear the skin and feathers of the same fowl. He came toward Euvoran, shouting indistinctly through his matted beard; and the king beheld him with surprise and anger, and cried loudly:

“Vile serf, how darest thou to kill the bird that is sacred to the kings of Ustaim? And knowest thou not that only the kings may wear the bird for headgear? I, who am King Euvoran, shall hold thee to a dire accounting of these deeds.”

At this, eyeing Euvoran strangely, the man laughed a long and derisive laugh, as if he deemed the king a person somewhat addled in his wits. And he seemed to find much merriment in the aspect of the king, whose garments were draggled and were stiff and stained with the drying seawater, and whose turban had been snatched away by the felon waves, leaving his baldness without disguise. And when he had done laughing, the man said:

“Verily, this is the first and only jest that I have heard in nine years, and my laughter must be forgiven. For nine years ago I was shipwrecked on this isle, being a sea-captain from the far southwestern land of Ullotroi, and the sole member of my ship’s company that survived and came safe to shore. In all those years I have held speech with no other man, since the isle is remote from the maritime routes, and has no people other than the birds. And as for your questions, they are readily answered: I kill these fowl to avert the pangs of famine, since there is little else on the isle for sustenance, apart from roots and berries. And I wear on my head the skin and feathers of the fowl because my tarboosh was stolen by the sea whenas it flung me rudely upon this strand. And I wot not of the strange laws that you mention; and moreover, your kingship is a matter that concerns me little, since the isle is kingless, and you and I are alone thereon, and I am the stronger of us twain and the better armed. Therefore be well advised, O King Euvoran; and since you have slain yourself a bird, I counsel you to pick up the bird and come with me. Truly, it may be that I can help you in the matter of spitting and broiling this fowl: for I must deem that you are more familiar with the products of the culinary art than with the practice.”

Now, hearing all this, the wrath of Euvoran sank within him like a flame that fails for oil. Clearly he saw the plight to which his voyage had brought him in the end; and bitterly he discerned the irony that was hidden in the

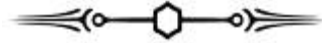
true oracle of Geol. And he knew that the wreckage of his fleet of war was scattered among lost islands or blown into seas unvoyageable. And it came to him that never again should he see the marble houses of Aramoam, nor live in pleasant luxury, nor administer the dooms of law between the torturer and the executioner in the hall of justice, nor wear the gazolba-crown amid the plaudits of his people. So, not being utterly bereft of reason, he bowed him to his destiny.

And he said to the sea-captain, "There is sense in what you say. Therefore lead on."

Then, laden with the spoils of the chase, Euvoran and the captain, whose name was Naz Obbamar, repaired companionably to a cave in the rocky hill-slope of the isle's interior, which Naz Obbamar had chosen for his abode. Here the captain made a fire of dry cedar boughs, and showed the king the proper manner in which to pluck his fowl and broil it over the fire, turning it slowly on a spit of green camphor-wood. And Euvoran, being famished, found the meat of the gazolba far from unpalatable, though somewhat lean and strongly flavored. And after they had eaten, Naz Obbamar brought out from the cave a rough jar of the island clay containing a wine he had made from certain berries; and he and Euvoran drank from the jar by turns, and told each other the tale of their adventures, and forgot for a while the rudeness and desolation of their plight.

Thereafter they shared the isle of gazolbas, killing and eating the birds as their hunger ordained. Sometimes, for a great delicacy, they slew and ate some other fowl that was more rarely met on the isle, though common enough, perhaps in Ustaim or Ullotroi. And King Euvoran made him a headdress from the skin and plumes of the gazolba, even as Naz Obbamar had done. And this was the fashion of their days till the end.

The Maze of the Enchanter



WITH NO OTHER light than that of the four diminutive moons of Xiccarph, each in a different phase but all decreascent, Tiglari had crossed the bottomless swamp of Soorm, wherein no reptile dwelt and no dragon descended — but where the pitch-black ooze was alive with continual heavings and writhings. He had carefully avoided the high causey of white corundum that spanned the fen, and had threaded his way with infinite peril from isle to sedgy isle that shuddered gelatinously beneath him. When he reached the solid shore and the shelter of the palm-tall rushes, he was equally careful to avoid the pale porphyry stairs that wound heavenward through dizzy, nadir-cleaving chasms and along glassy scarps to the ever-mysterious and terrible house of Maal Dweb. The causey and the stairs were guarded by those that he did not wish to meet: the silent, colossal iron servitors of Maal Dweb, whose arms ended in long crescent blades of tempered steel which were raised in implacable scything against any who came thither without their master's permission.

Tiglari's naked body was smeared from crown to heel with the juice of a jungle plant repugnant to all the fauna of Xiccarph. By virtue of this he hoped to pass unharmed the ferocious ape-like creatures that roamed at will through the cliff-hung gardens and halls of the Tyrant. He carried a coil of woven root-fiber, wonderfully strong and light, and weighted with a brazen ball at one end, for use in climbing the mountain. At his side, in a sheath of chimera-skin, he wore a needle-sharp knife that had been dipt in the mortal poison of winged vipers.

Many, before Tiglari, with the same noble dream of tyrannicide, had attempted to cross the pitchy fen and scale the forbidding scarps. But none had returned; and the fate of such as had actually won to the mountain palace of Maal Dweb was a much-disputed problem; since no man had ever again beheld them, living or dead. But Tiglari, the jungle hunter, skilled in the slaying of fierce and crafty beasts, was undeterred by the more than hideous probabilities before him.

The escalate of the mountain would have been a highly dangerous feat by the full light of the three suns of Xiccarph. With eyes that were keen as those of some night-flying pterodactyl, Tiglari hurled his weighted coil about projecting coigns and fang-like salients. Hand over hand, he went up with simian ease from foothold to precarious foothold; and at length he attained a narrow buttress beneath the final cliff. From this vantage, it was an easy matter to fling his rope around the crooked bole of a tree that leaned gulfward with scimitar-like foliage from the gardens of Maal Dweb.

Evading the sharp and semi-metallic leaves that seemed to slash downward as the tree bent limberly with his dangling weight, he stood, stooping warily, on the fearsome and widely fabled mesa. Here, it was rumored, with no human aid, the half-demoniac sorcerer and scientist had carved the more lofty pinnacles of the old mountain into walls, cupolas and turrets, and had levelled a great space about them. This space he had covered immediately with loamy soil, produced by magic; and therein he had planted curious baneful trees from outlying worlds beyond the suns of Xiccarph, together with flowers that might have been those of some teeming and exuberant hell.

Little enough was actually known of these gardens; but the flora that grew on the northern, southern and western sides of the palace was popularly believed to be less deadly than that which faced the dawning of

the triple suns. Much of this latter vegetation, according to myth, had been trained and topiarized in the form of an almost infinite labyrinth, balefully ingenious, from which egress was impossible: a maze that concealed in its windings the most fatal and atrocious traps, the most unpredictable dooms, invented by the malign Daedalus. Mindful of this labyrinth, Tiglari had approached the place on the side that fronted the three-fold sunset.

Breathless, with arms that ached from the long, arduous climb, he crouched in the garden shadows. About him he saw the heavy-hooded blossoms that leaned from a winy gloom in venomous languour, or fawned toward him with open corollas that exhaled a narcotic perfume or diffused a pollen of madness. Anomalous, multiform, with silhouettes that curdled the blood or touched the brain with nightmare, the trees of Maal Dweb appeared to gather and conspire against him beyond the flowers. Some arose with the sinuous towering of plumed pythons, or aigretted dragons. Others crouched with radiating limbs that were like the hairy members of colossal arachnidans. They seemed to close in upon Tiglari with a stealthy motion. They waved their frightful darts of thorn, their scythe-like leaves. They blotted the four moons with webs of arabesque menace. They reared from interminably coiling roots behind mammoth foliages that resembled an army of interlocking shields.

With endless caution and calculation, the hunter made his way forward, seeking a rift in the armed phalanx of vegetable monstrosities. His faculties, ever alert, were abnormally quickened by a grievous fear, intensified by a mighty hatred. The fear was not for himself, but for the girl Athle', his beloved and the fairest of his tribe, who had gone up alone that very evening by the causeway of corundum and the porphyry stairs at the summons of Maal Dweb. His hatred was that of a brave man and an outraged lover for the all-powerful, all-dreaded tyrant whom no man had ever seen, and from

whose abode no woman came back; who spoke with an iron voice that was audible at will in the far cities or the outmost jungles; who punished the rebellious and the disobedient with a doom of falling fire that was swifter than the thunderstone.

Maal Dweb had taken ever the fairest from among the maidens of the planet Xiccarph; and no palace of walled towns, or savage outland cave, was exempt from his unknown scrutiny. He had chosen no less than fifty girls during the three decades of his tyranny; and these, forsaking their lovers and kinsfolk voluntarily, lest the wrath of Maal Dweb should descend upon them, had gone one by one to the mountain citadel and were lost behind its cryptic walls. There, as the odalisques of the aging sorcerer, they were supposed to dwell in halls that multiplied their beauty with a thousand mirrors; and were said to have for servants women of brass and men of iron that mimicked in all ways the motion and speech of living people.

Tiglari had poured before Athle' the uncouth adoration of his heart and the barbaric spoils of the chase, but having many rivals, was still unsure of her favor. Cool as a river lily, and no less impartial, she had accepted his worship and that of the others, among whom the warrior Mocair was perhaps the most formidable. Returning at eve from the hunt, Tiglari had found the tribe in lamentation; and, learning that Athle' had departed to the harem of Maal Dweb, was swift to follow.

He had not announced his intention to his fellow tribesmen, since the ears of Maal Dweb were everywhere; and he did not know whether Mocair or any of the others had preceded him in his desperate errantry. Mocair, however, had been absent; and it was not unlikely that he had already dared the obscure and hideous perils of the mountain.

The thought of this was enough to drive Tiglari forward with a rash disregard of the poisonous, reptile flowers and clutching foliations. He

came anon to a gap in the horrible grove, and saw the saffron lights from the lower windows of Maal Dweb, and a dark thronging of domes and turrets that assailed the constellations above. The lights were vigilant as the eyes of sleepless dragons, and appeared to regard him with an evil, unblinking awareness. But Tiglari leapt toward them, across the gap, and heard the clash of sabered leaves that met behind him.

Before him was an open lawn, covered with a queer grass that squirmed like innumerable worms beneath his bare feet. He did not care to linger upon that lawn, but ran onward with light, skimming paces. There were no footmarks in the grass; but nearing the portico of the palace, he saw a coil of thin rope that someone had flung aside, and knew that Mocair had preceded him.

There were paths of mottled marble about the palace, and fountains and waterfalls that played with a gurgling as of blood from the throats of carven monsters. The open portals were unguarded, and the whole building was still as a mausoleum lit by windless lamps. No shadows moved behind the brilliant yellow windows; and darkness slept unbroken among the high towers and cupolas. Tiglari, however, mistrusted sorely the appearance of quietude and slumber, and followed the bordering paths for some distance before daring to approach nearer to the palace.

Certain large and shadowy animals, which he took for the apish monsters of Maal Dweb, went by him in the gloom. They were hairy and uncouth, with sloping heads. Some of them ran in four-footed fashion, while others maintained the half-erect posture of anthropoids. They did not offer to molest Tiglari: but, whining dismally like dogs, they slunk away as if to avoid him. By this token, he knew that they were veritable beasts, and could not abide the odor with which he had smeared his limbs and torso.

At length, he came to a lampless portico with crowded columns. Here, with the silent gliding of a jungle snake, he entered the mysterious and ever-dreadful house of Maal Dweb. Behind the dark pillars, a door stood open; and beyond the door were the dim and seemingly endless reaches of an empty hall.

Tiglari went in with redoubled caution, and began to follow the arras'd wall. The place was full of unknown perfumes, languorous and somnolent: a subtle reek as of censers in hidden alcoves of love. He did not like the perfumes; and the silence troubled him more and more as he went deeper into the palace. It seemed to him that the darkness was thick with unheard breathings, was alive with invisible and sinister movements.

Slowly, like the opening of great yellow eyes, the yellow flames arose in mighty lamps of copper that hung along the hall. Tiglari hid himself behind a heavy-figured arras; but peeping out with eerie trepidation, he saw that the hall was still deserted. Finally, he dared to resume his progress. All about him, the imperial hangings, brodered with purple men and azure women on a field of bright blood, appeared to stir with easy life in a wind that he could not feel; and the lamps regarded him with unwavering splendid eyes. But there was no sign of the presence of Maal Dweb; and the metal servitors and human odalisques of the tyrant were nowhere to be seen.

The doors on either side of the hall, with cunningly mated valves of ebony and ivory, were all closed. At the far end, Tiglari saw a rift of flaming light in a somber double arras. Parting the arras very softly, he peered into a huge, brightly illumined chamber that seemed at first sight to be the harem of Maal Dweb, peopled with all the girls that the enchanter had summoned to his mountain dwelling over a course of decades. In fact, it seemed that there were many hundreds, leaning or recumbent on ornate couches, or standing in attitudes of languor or terror. Tiglari discerned in the throng the

women of Ommu-Zain, whose flesh is whiter than desert salt; the slim girls of Uthmai, who are moulded from breathing, palpitating jet; the queenly amber girls of equatorial Xala; and the small women of Ilap, who have the tones of newly greening bronze. But among them all, he could not find the liliated beauty of Athle’.

Greatly did he marvel at the number of the women and the utter stillness with which they maintained their various postures. There was no lifting nor falling of eyelids, no dropping of hands, no curving nor opening of lips. They were like images of living, subtly painted marble, or goddesses that slept in some enchanted hall of eternity.

Tiglari, the intrepid hunter, was awed and frightened. Here, surely, was proof of the fabled sorceries of Maal Dweb. These women — if indeed they were women and not mere statues — had been made the thralls of a death-like spell of immortal slumber. It was as if some invisible medium of adamantine silence had filled the room, had formed about its occupants: a silence wherein, it seemed, no mortal being could draw breath.

However, if Tiglari were to continue his search for Maal Dweb and Athle’, it was necessary for him to traverse the enchanted chamber. Feeling that a marble sleep might descend upon him at the very crossing of the sill, he went with holden breath and furtive pard-like paces. About him, the women preserved their eternal stillness, their various airs and attitudes. Each, it appeared, had been overcome by the spell at the instant of some particular emotion, whether of fear, wonder, curiosity, vanity, weariness, anger or voluptuousness. Their number was fewer than he had supposed, and the room itself was smaller, but metal mirrors, panelling the walls, had created an illusion of multitude and immensity.

At the further end, he came to a second double arras, slightly parted, and revealing only shadow beyond. Peering through, he beheld a twilight

chamber, illuminated dimly by two censers that gave forth a parti-colored glow and a red fume as of vapping blood. The censers were set on lofty tripods in the far corners, facing each other. Between them, beneath a canopy of some dark and smouldering stuff with fringes braided like women's hair, was a couch of nocturnal purples with a valance of silver birds that fought against golden snakes. On the couch, in sober garments, a man reclined as if weary or asleep. The face of the man was a pale mask of mystery lying amid ambiguous shadows; but it did not occur to Tiglari that this being was any other than the redoubtable and tyrannic sorcerer whom he had come to slay. He knew that this was Maal Dweb, whom no man had seen in the flesh, but whose power was manifest to all; the occult, omniscient ruler of Xiccarph; the overlord of kings; the suzerain of the three suns and of all their moons and planets.

Like ghostly sentinels, the symbols of the grandeur of Maal Dweb, the images of his frightful empire, rose up to confront Tiglari. But the thought of Athle' was a red mist that blotted all. He forgot his eerie terrors, his awe of the ensorcelled palace. The rage of the bereaved lover, the bloodthirst of the cunning hunter, awoke within him to guide his agile, stealthy paces, to make firm his powerful thews. The chamber was empty, except for the still and languid figure on the couch. Tiglari neared the unconscious sorcerer; and his hand grew tight on the hilt of the needle-like knife that was dipt in viper-venom.

The man before him lay with closed eyes and a cryptic weariness on his mouth and eyelids. He seemed to meditate rather than sleep, like one who wanders in a maze of distant memories or profound reveries. About him the walls were draped with funereal hangings, darkly and vaguely figured. Above him the twin censers wrought a cloudy glow, and diffused

throughout the room their drowsy myrrh, which made the senses of Tiglari swim with a strange dimness.

Crouching tiger-wise beside the valance of birds and serpents, he made ready for the stroke. Then, mastering the subtle vertigo of the perfumes, he rose up; and his arm, with the darting movement of some heavy but supple adder, struck fiercely at the tyrant's heart.

It was as if he had tried to pierce a wall of adamant. In mid-air, before and above the recumbent enchanter, the knife clashed on some impenetrable substance that Tiglari could not see; and the point broke off and tinkled on the floor at his feet. Uncomprehending, baffled, he peered at the being whom he had sought to slay. Maal Dweb had not stirred nor opened his eyes. There was neither frown nor smile on his features; but their look of enigmatic weariness was somehow touched with a faint and cruel amusement.

Hesitantly, Tiglari put out his hand to verify a certain curious notion that had occurred to him. Even as he had suspected, there was no couch or canopy between the fuming censers — only a vertical, unbroken, highly-polished surface, in which the whole scene was apparently reflected. He had tried to kill a mirrored image. But, to his further mystification, he himself was not visible in the mirror.

He whirled about, thinking Maal Dweb must be somewhere in the room. Even as he turned, the funereal draperies rushed back with an evil, silken whispering from the wall, as if drawn by unseen hands. The chamber leaped into sudden glaring light, the walls appeared to recede illimitably; and naked giants, whose umber-brown limbs and torsos glistened as if smeared with ointment, stood in menacing postures on every side. Their eyes glowered like those of jungle creatures; and each of them held an enormous knife, from which the point had been broken.

This, thought Tiglari, was a fearsome thaumaturgy; and he crouched down beneath the tripods, wary as a trapped animal, to await the assault of the giants. But these beings, crouching simultaneously, mimicked his every movement. By degrees it came to him that what he saw was his own reflection, multiplied and monstrously amplified in the mirrors of Maal Dweb.

He turned again. The tasseled canopy, the couch of night-dark purples with its figured valance, the reclining dreamer in plain vestments, all had vanished. Of that which he had beheld, only the smoking censers remained, rearing before a glassy wall that gave back like the others the reflection of Tiglari himself.

Bafflement and terror united now in the savage brain of the hunter. He felt that Maal Dweb, the all-seeing, all-potent magician, was playing a game and was deluding him with elaborate mockeries. Rashly indeed had Tiglari pitted his simple brawn and forest craft against a being of such supernatural power and demoniac artifice. He dared not stir; he scarcely ventured to breathe. The monstrous reflections appeared to watch him like ogres who guard a captive pygmy. The light, which emanated as if from hidden lamps in the mirrors, took on a more pitiless and alarming luster, and centered itself upon him with a silent horror. The vast, illusive reaches of the room appeared to deepen; and far away in their shadows, he saw the gathering of vapors with human faces that melted and re-formed incessantly and were never twice the same.

Ever the eerie radiance brightened; ever the mist of faces, like a hell-born fume, dissolved and re-limned itself behind the immobile giants, in the lengthening vistas. An unheard laughter, malevolent, scornful, seemed to lurk beyond the stillness. How long Tiglari waited, he could not tell; the bright and frozen horror of that room was a thing apart from time.

Now, in the litten air, a voice began to speak; a voice that was toneless, deliberate — and disembodied. It was faintly contemptuous; a little weary; slightly cruel. It was impossible to align or locate; near as the beating of Tiglari's heart, and yet infinitely far.

“What do you seek, Tiglari?” said the voice. “Do you think to enter with impunity the palace of Maal Dweb? Others — many others, with the same intentions — have come before you: but all have paid a certain price for their temerity.”

“I seek the maiden Athle’,” said Tiglari. “What have you done with her?” The words were strange to him, their very sound was remote, as if another than himself had spoken.

“Athle’ is very beautiful,” replied the voice. “It is the will of Maal Dweb to make a certain use of her loveliness. The use is not one that should concern a hunter of wild beasts... You are unwise, Tiglari.”

“Where is Athle’?” persisted the hunter.

“Athle’ has gone to find her fate in the labyrinth of Maal Dweb. Not long ago, the warrior Mocair, who had followed her to my palace, went out at my suggestion to pursue his search amid the threadless windings of that never to be exhausted maze. Go now, Tiglari, and seek her also... There are many mysteries in my labyrinth; and among them all, mayhap, there is one which you are destined to solve.”

The hunter saw that a door had opened in the mirror-panelled wall. In the depth of the mirrors, two of the metal slaves of Maal Dweb had appeared. Taller than living men, and gleaming from head to foot with implacable lusters as of burnished swords, they came forward upon Tiglari. The right arm of each was handed with a crescent sickle. Hastily, with no backward glance, the hunter went out through the open door. Behind him he heard the surly clash of its meeting valves.

The short night of the planet Xiccarph was not yet over; and the four moons had all gone down. But before him he saw the beginning of the fabled maze, illuminated clearly by glowing globular fruits that hung lantern-wise from baroque arches and arcades of foliage. Guided by their still, uncanny luminescence, he entered the labyrinth.

At first, it was a place of elfin fantasies and whims. There were quaintly turned estrades, pillared with slim and antic trees, latticed with the drolly peering faces of extravagant orchids, that led the seeker to hidden, surprising bowers of goblinry. It was as if those outer meanderings had been planned merely to entice and bemuse and beguile.

Then, by vague degrees, as the hunter went on, it seemed that the designer's mood had darkened, had become more ominous and baleful. The trees that lined the path, with twisted, intertwining boles, were Laocoons of struggle and torture, lit by enormous fungi that seemed to lift unholy tapers. The path itself ran downward, or climbed with evilly tilted steps through caverns of imbricated leafage that shone with the brazen glistening of dragon-scales. At every turning the way divided before Tiglari; the devious branchings multiplied; and skillful though he was in jungle-craft, it would have been wholly impossible for him to retrace his wanderings. He kept on, hoping that chance would somehow lead him to Athle'; and many times he called her name aloud, but was answered only by remote, derisive echoes, or by the dolorous howling of some unseen beast that had become lost in the maze of Maal Dweb.

He came to eerie pools, alight with coiling and wreathing witch-fires, in dim arboreal grottoes. Greenish, bloated hands as of dead men appeared to lift from the changing films of phosphorescence; and once he thought that he beheld the drowning face of Athle'. He plunged into the shallow pool —

but found only fetid slime, and a swollen, nauseous thing that squirmed slowly beneath his touch.

Now he was mounting through arbors of malignant hydra growths that coiled and uncoiled about him tumultuously. The way lightened more and more; the night-shining fruits and blossoms were pale and sickly as the dying tapers of a witches' revel. The earliest of the three suns had risen; and its gamboge-yellow beams were filtering in through the plaited horrors of frilled and venomous vines.

Far off, and seeming to fall from some hidden height in the labyrinth before him, he heard a chorus of brazen voices that were like articulate bells or gongs. He could not distinguish the words; but the accents were those of a solemn and portentous announcement. They were fraught with mystic finality, with hieratic doom. They ceased; and there was no sound other than the hiss and rustle of swaying plants.

Tiglari went on. The tortuous maze became wilder and more anomalous. There were tiered growths, like obscene sculptures or architectural forms, that seemed to be of stone and metal. Others were like carnal nightmares of rooted flesh, that wallowed and fought and coupled in noisome ooze. Foul things with chancrous blossoms flaunted themselves on infernal obelisks. Living parasitic mosses of crimson crawled on vegetable monsters that swelled and bloated behind the columns of accursed pavilions.

It seemed now that the hunter's every step was predestined and dictated. He was no longer free to choose his way; for many paths were overgrown by things that he did care to face; and others were blocked by horrid portcullises of cacti, or ended in pools whose waters teemed with leeches larger than tunnies. The second and third suns of Xiccarph arose; but their beams of emerald and carmine served but to heighten the terrors of the web that had closed in about Tiglari.

By stairs where floral serpents crept, and gradients lined with tossing, clashing aloes, he climbed slowly on. Rarely could he see the labyrinthine reaches below, or the levels toward which he was tending. Somewhere on the blind path, he met one of the ape-like animals of Maal Dweb: a dark, savage creature, sleek and glistening like a wet otter, as if it had bathed in one of the hidden pools. It passed him with a hoarse growl, recoiling as the others had done from his repulsively smeared body... But nowhere could he find the maiden Athle' or the warrior Mocair, who had preceded him into the maze.

Now he had reached a curious little pavement of somber onyx, oblong, and wholly surrounded, except on the side of his approach, by enormous flowers with fluted bronze-like stems and great leaning balls that seemed to be the mottled heads of bestial chimeras, yawning to disclose their carmine throats. Through the gap in this singular hedge, he stepped forward on the pavement and stood staring irresolutely at the serried blooms: for here the way seemed to end.

The onyx beneath his feet was wet with some unknown, sticky fluid. He was dazed with the wonder, strangeness, and intricate, coiling horror through which he had passed; but a dim warning of peril stirred within him. He turned toward the gap through which he had entered, but his impulse of retreat was all too late. From the base of each of the tall flower stems, a long tendril like a wire of bronze uncoiled with lightning rapidity, and closed about his ankles. He stood trapped and helpless at the center of a taut net. Then, while he struggled ineffectually, the huge stems began to lean and tilt toward him, till the carmine mouths of the blossoms were close about his knees like a circle of fawning monsters.

Nearer they came, almost touching him. From their thick lips a clear, hueless liquid, dripping slowly at first, and then running in little rills,

descended on his feet and ankles and shanks. Indescribably, his flesh crawled beneath it; then there was a peculiar passing numbness; then a furious stinging like the bites of innumerable insects. Between the crowding heads of the flowers he saw that his legs had undergone a mysterious and horrifying change; their natural hairiness had thickened, had assumed a dark and shaggy pile like the fur of apes; the shanks themselves had somehow shortened; and the feet had grown longer, with uncouth finger-like toes such as were possessed by the animals of Maal Dweb!

In a frenzy of nameless alarm and fear, he drew his broken-tipped knife and began to slash at the flowers. It was as if he had struck at monstrous bells of ringing iron, had assailed the armored heads of dragons. The blade snapped at the hilt. Then the blossoms, lifting hideously, were leaning about his waist, were laving his hips and thighs in their thin, evil slaver.

Across the bizarre nightmare in which his brain and body were drowning impotently, he heard the startled cry of a woman. Through the open gap in the hedge, he beheld a strange scene which the hitherto impenetrable maze, parting as if magic, had revealed. Fifty feet away, on the same level as the onyx pavement, there stood an elliptic dais or low altar of moonwhite stone at whose center the maiden Athle', emerging from the labyrinth on a raised walk of porphyry, had paused in an attitude of wonder. Before her, in the claws of an immense marble lizard that reared above the dais, a great circular mirror of steely metal was held upright, with the monster's head hidden from view behind it. Athle', as if fascinated by some celestial vision, was peering into the steely disk. She presented her wide-eyed profile to Tiglari; and the mirror itself was seen obliquely, with the foreshortened body of the lizard reaching away at a sharp angle and mingling obscenely with the half-reptilian maze. Midway between the onyx pavement and the ellipse of pale stone, a row of six slender brazen columns, topped with

graven heads like demoniac Termini, rose at broad intervals and faced alternately the hunter and the girl.

Tiglari would have called out to Athle'; but at that moment she took a single step toward the mirror, as if drawn by something that she saw in its depths; and the dull disk seemed to brighten with some internal, incandescent flame. The eyes of the hunter were temporarily blinded by the spiky rays that leapt forth from it for an instant, enveloping and transfixing the maiden. When the dimness cleared away in swirling blots of sultry color, he saw that Athle', in a pose of statuesque rigidity, was still regarding the mirror with startled eyes. She had not moved; the wonder was frozen on her face: and it came to Tiglari that she was like the women who slept an enchanted slumber in the palace of Maal Dweb. Even as this thought occurred to him, he heard the ringing chorus of metallic voices, that seemed to emanate from the graven demon heads upon the columns.

"The maiden Athle'," announced the voices in solemn and portentous tones, "has beheld herself in the mirror of Eternity, and has passed forever beyond the changes and corruptions of Time."

Tiglari felt that he was sinking into some enormous, obscurely terrible fen of dreams. He could comprehend nothing of what had befallen Athle'; and his own fate was an equally dark and dread enigma beyond the solution of a simple hunter.

Now the leaning blossoms had lifted about his shoulders, were laving his arms, his body. Beneath their abhorrent alchemy the transformation continued. A long fur sprang up on the thickening torso; the arms lengthened; they became simian; the hands took on a likeness to the feet. From the neck downward, Tiglari differed in no wise from the apes of the garden.

In helpless abject terror, he waited for the completion of the metamorphosis. Then, slowly, he became aware that a man in sober garments, with eyes and mouth replete with the weariness of strange things, was standing before him. Behind the man, as if attending him, were two of the sickle-handed automatons of iron.

In a somewhat languid voice, the man uttered an unknown word that vibrated in the air with prolonged, mysterious aftertones. The circle of craning flowers drew back from Tiglari, resuming their former upright positions in a weird hedge; and the wiry tendrils were withdrawn from his ankles, leaving him free. Hardly able to comprehend his release, he heard a sound of brazen voices, and knew dimly that the demon heads of the columns had spoken, saying:

“The hunter Tiglari has been laved in the nectar of the blossoms of primordial life, and has become in all ways, from the neck downward, even as the beasts that he hunted.”

When the solemn chorus ceased, the weary man in sober raiment came nearer and addressed him:

“I, Maal Dweb, had intended to deal with you precisely as I dealt with Mocair and many others. Mocair was the beast that you met in the labyrinth, with new-made fur that was still sleek and wet from the liquor of the flowers; and you saw some of his predecessors about the palace. However, I find that my whims are not always the same. You, Tiglari, unlike the others, shall at least remain a man from the neck upward; and you are free to resume your wanderings in the labyrinth, and escape from it if you can. I do not wish to see you again, and my clemency arises from another reason than esteem for your kind. Go now: the maze has many windings which you are yet to traverse.”

A dreadful awe was upon Tiglari; his native fierceness, his savage volition, were tamed by the enchanter's languid will. With one backward look of fearful concern and wonder at the frozen shape of Athle', he withdrew obediently, slouching like a great ape. His fur glistening wetly to the three suns, he vanished amid the meanderings of the labyrinth.

Maal Dweb, attended by his metal slaves, went over to the figure of Athle', which still regarded the steely mirror with astonished eyes.

"Mong Lut," he said, addressing by name the nearer of the two automatons that followed at his heels, "it has been, as you know, my caprice to eternalize the frail beauty of women. Athle', like the others whom I have summoned to the mountain and have sent out to explore the ingenious maze, has looked upon that mirror whose sudden radiance turns the flesh to a stone that is fairer than marble and no less eternal... Also, as you know, it has been my whim to turn men into beasts with the copious fluid of certain artificial flowers, so that their outer semblance should conform strictly to their inner nature. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I should have done these things? Am I not Maal Dweb, in whom all knowledge and all power reside?"

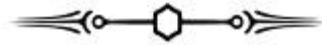
"Yes, master," echoed the automaton in an iron voice, "you are Maal Dweb, the all-wise, the all-powerful, and it is well that you should have done these things."

"However," continued Maal Dweb, "the repetition of even the most remarkable thaumaturgies can grow monotonous after a certain number of times. I do not think that I shall deal again in this fashion with any woman, nor deal thus with any man. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I should vary my sorceries in future? Am I not Maal Dweb, the all-resourceful?"

"Indeed, you are Maal Dweb," agreed the automaton, "and it would be well for you to diversify your enchantments."

Maal Dweb, in his manner, was not ill pleased with the answers that the automaton had given. He cared little for converse, other than the iron echoing of his metal servitors, who assented always to all that he said, and who spared him the tedium of arguments. And it may have been that there were times when he wearied a little even of this, and preferred the silence of the petrified women, or the muteness of the beasts that could no longer call themselves men.

The Double Shadow



MY NAME IS Pharpetron, among those who have known me in Poseidonis; but even I, the last and most forward pupil of the wise Avyctes, know not the name of that which I am fated to become ere to-morrow. Therefore, by the ebbing silver lamps, in my master's marble house above the loud, ever-ravensing sea, I write this tale with a hasty hand, scrawling an ink of wizard virtue on the grey, priceless, antique parchment of dragons. And having written, I shall enclose the pages in a sealed cylinder of orichalchum, and shall cast the cylinder from a high window into the sea, lest that which I am doomed to become should haply destroy the writing. And it may be that mariners from Lephara, passing to Umb and Pneor in their tall triremes, will find the cylinder; or fishers will draw it from the wave in their seines of byssus; and having read my story, men will learn the truth and take warning; and no man's feet, henceforward, will approach the pale and demon-haunted house of Avyctes.

For six years, I have dwelt apart with the aged master, forgetting youth and its wonted desires in the study of arcanic things. Together, we have delved more deeply than all others before us in an interdicted lore; we have solved the keyless hieroglyphs that guard ante-human formulae; we have talked with the prehistoric dead; we have called up the dwellers in sealed crypts, in fearful abysses beyond space. Few are the sons of mankind who have cared to seek us out among the desolate, wind-worn crags; and many, but nameless, are the visitants who have come to us from further bourns of place and time.

Stern and white as a tomb, older than the memory of the dead, and built by men or devils beyond the recording of myth, is the mansion in which we dwell. Far below, on black, naked reefs, the northern sea climbs and roars indomitably, or ebbs with a ceaseless murmur as of armies of baffled demons; and the house is filled evermore, like a hollow-sounding sepulcher, with the drear echo of its tumultuous voices; and the winds wail in dismal wrath around the high towers, but shake them not. On the seaward side, the mansion rises sheerly from the straight-falling cliff; but on the other sides there are narrow terraces, grown with dwarfish, crooked cedars that bow always beneath the gale. Giant marble monsters guard the landward portals; and huge marble women ward the strait porticoes above the sea; and mighty statues and mummies stand everywhere in the chambers and along the halls. But, saving these, and the spirits we have summoned, there is none to companion us; and liches and shadows have been the servitors of our daily needs.

All men have heard the fame of Avyctes, the sole surviving pupil of that Malygris who tyrannized in his necromancy over Susran from a tower of sable stone; Malygris, who lay dead for years while men believed him living; who, lying thus, still uttered potent spells and dire oracles with decaying lips. But Avyctes lusted not for temporal power in the manner of Malygris; and having learned all that the elder sorcerer could teach him, withdrew from the cities of Poseidonis to seek another and vaster dominion; and I, the youth Pharpetron, in the latter years of Avyctes, was permitted to join him in this solitude; and since then, I have shared his austerities and vigils and evocations... and now, likewise, I must share the weird doom that has come in answer to his summoning.

Not without terror (since man is but mortal) did I, the neophyte, behold at first the abhorrent and tremendous faces of them that obeyed Avyctes: the

genii of the sea and earth, of the stars and the heavens, who passed to and fro in his marmorean halls. I shuddered at the black writhing of submundane things from the many-volumed smoke of the braziers; I cried in horror at the grey foulnesses, colossal, without form, that crowded malignly about the drawn circle of seven colors, threatening unspeakable trespass on us that stood at the center. Not without revulsion did I drink wine that was poured by cadavers, and eat bread that was purveyed by phantoms. But use and custom dulled the strangeness, destroyed the fear; and in time I believed implicitly that Avyctes was the lord of all incantations and exorcisms, with infallible power to dismiss the beings he evoked.

Well had it had been for Avyctes — and for me — if the master had contented himself with the lore preserved from Atlantis and Thule, or brought over from Mu and Mayapan. Surely this should have been enough: for in the ivory-sheeted books of Thule there were blood-writ runes that would call the demons of the fifth and seventh planets, if spoken aloud at the hour of their ascent; and the sorcerers of Mu had left record of a process whereby the doors of far-future time could be unlocked; and our fathers, the Atlanteans, had known the road between the atoms and the path into far stars, and had held speech with the spirits of the sun. But Avyctes thirsted for a darker knowledge, a deeper empery; and into his hands, in the third year of my novitiate, there came the mirror-bright tablet of the lost serpent-people.

Strange, and apparently fortuitous, was our finding of the tablet. At certain hours, when the tide had fallen from the steep rocks, we were wont to descend by cavern-hidden stairs to a cliff-walled crescent beach behind the promontory on which stood the house of Avyctes. There, on the dun, wet sands, beyond the foamy tongues of the surf, would lie the worn and curious driftage of alien shores, and trove that hurricanes had cast up from

unsounded deeps. And there we had found the purple and sanguine volutes of great shells, and rude lumps of ambergris, and white flowers of perpetually blooming coral; and once, the barbaric idol of green brass that had been the figurehead of a galley from far hyperboreal isles.

There had been a great storm, such as must have riven the sea to its nethermost profound; but the tempest had gone by with morning, and the heavens were cloudless on that fatal day when we found the tablet, and the demon winds were hushed among the high crags and chasms; and the sea lisped with a low whisper, like the rustle of gowns of samite trailed by fleeing maidens on the sand. And just beyond the ebbing wave, in a tangle of russet sea-weed, we beheld a thing that glittered with blinding sun-like brilliance. And running forward, I plucked it from the wrack before the wave's return, and bore it to Avyctes.

The tablet was wrought of some nameless metal, like never-rusting iron, but heavier. It had the form of a triangle and was broader at the widest than a man's heart. On one side it was wholly blank; and Avyctes and I, in turn, beheld our features mirrored strangely, like the drawn, pallid features of the dead, in its burnished surface. On the other side many rows of small crooked ciphers were incised deeply in the metal, as if by the action of some mordant acid; and these ciphers were not the pictorial symbols or alphabetic characters of any language known to the master or to me.

Of the tablet's age and origin, likewise, we could form no conjecture; and our erudition was altogether baffled. For many days thereafter we studied the writing and held argument that came to no issue. And night by night, in a high chamber closed against the perennial winds, we pondered over the dazzling triangle by the tall straight flames of silver lamps. For Avyctes deemed that knowledge of rare value (or haply some secret of an alien or elder magic) was holden by the clueless crooked ciphers. Then,

since all our scholarship was in vain, the master sought another divination, and had recourse to wizardry and necromancy. But at first, among the devils and phantoms that answered our interrogation, none could tell us aught concerning the tablet. And any other than Avyctes would have despaired in the end... and well would it have been if he had despaired, and had sought no longer to decipher the writing ...

The months and years went by with a slow thundering of seas on the dark rocks, and a headlong clamor of winds around the white towers. Still we continued our delvings and evocations; and further, always further we went into lampless realms of space and spirit; learning, perchance, to unlock the hithermost of the manifold infinities. And at whiles, Avyctes would resume his pondering of the sea-found tablet; or would question some visitant from other spheres of time and place regarding its interpretation.

At last, by the use of a chance formula, in idle experiment, he summoned up the dim, tenuous ghost of a sorcerer from prehistoric years; and the ghost, in a thin whisper of uncouth, forgotten speech, informed us that the letters on the tablet were those of a language of the serpent-men, whose primordial continent had sunk aeons before the lifting of Hyperborea from the ooze. But the ghost could tell us naught of their significance; for, even in his time, the serpent-people had become a dubious legend; and their deep, ante-human lore and sorcery were things irretrievable by man.

Now, in all the books of conjuration owned by Avyctes, there was no spell whereby we could call the lost serpent-men from their fabulous epoch. But there was an old Lemurian formula, recondite and uncertain, by which the shadow of a dead man could be sent into years posterior to those of his own life-time, and could be recalled after an interim by the wizard. And the shade, being wholly insubstantial, would suffer no harm from the temporal

transition, and would remember, for the information of the wizard, that which he had been instructed to learn during the journey.

So, having called again the ghost of the prehistoric sorcerer, whose name was Ybith, Avyctes made a singular use of several very ardent gums and combustible fragments of fossil wood; and he and I, reciting the responses to the formula, sent the thin spirit of Ybith into the far ages of the serpent-men. And after a time which the master deemed sufficient, we performed the curious rites of incantation that would recall Ybith from his alienage. And the rites were successful; and Ybith stood before us again, like a blown vapor that is nigh to vanishing. And in words that were faint as the last echo of perishing memories, the specter told us the key to the meaning of the letters, which he had learned in the primeval past; and after this, we questioned Ybith no more, but suffered him to return unto slumber and oblivion.

Then, knowing the import of the tiny, twisted ciphers, we read the writing on the tablet and made thereof a transliteration, though not without labor and difficulty, since the very phonetics of the serpent tongue, and the symbols and ideas expressed in the writing, were somewhat alien to those of mankind. And when we had mastered the inscription, we found that it contained the formula for a certain evocation which, no doubt, had been used by the serpent sorcerers. But the object of the evocation was not named; nor was there any clue to the nature or identity of that which would come in answer to the rites. And moreover there was no corresponding rite of exorcism nor spell of dismissal.

Great was the jubilation of Avyctes, deeming that we had learned a lore beyond the memory or prevision of man. And though I sought to dissuade him, he resolved to employ the evocation, arguing that our discovery was no chance thing but was fatefully predestined from the beginning. And he

seemed to think lightly of the menace that might be brought upon us by the conjuration of things whose nativity and attributes were wholly obscure. "For," said Avyctes, "I have called up, in all the years of my sorcery, no god or devil, no demon or lich or shadow, which I could not control and dismiss at will. And I am loath to believe that any power or spirit beyond the subversion of my spells could have been summoned by a race of serpents, whatever their skill in demonism and necromancy."

So, seeing that he was obstinate, and acknowledging him for my master in all ways, I consented to aid Avyctes in the experiment, though not without dire misgivings. And then we gathered together, in the chamber of conjuration, at the specified hour and configuration of the stars, the equivalents of sundry rare materials that the tablet had instructed us to use in the ritual.

Of much that we did, and of certain agents that we employed, it were better not to tell; nor shall I record the shrill, sibilant words, difficult for beings not born of serpents to articulate, whose intonation formed a signal part of the ceremony. Toward the last, we drew a triangle on the marble floor with the fresh blood of birds; and Avyctes stood at one angle, and I at another; and the gaunt umber mummy of an Atlantean warrior, whose name had been Oigos, was stationed at the third angle. And standing thus, Avyctes and I held tapers of corpse-tallow in our hands, till the tapers had burned down between our fingers as into a socket. And in the outstretched palms of the mummy of Oigos, as if in shallow thuribles, talc and asbestos burned, ignited by a strange fire whereof we knew the secret. At one side we had traced on the floor an infrangible ellipse, made by an endless linked repetition of the twelve unspeakable Signs of Oumor, to which we could retire if the visitant should prove inimical or rebellious. We waited while the pole-circling stars went over, as had been prescribed. Then, when the tapers

had gone out between our seared fingers, and the talc and asbestos were wholly consumed in the mummy's eaten palms, Avyctes uttered a single word whose sense was obscure to us; and Oigos, being animated by sorcery and subject to our will, repeated the word after a given interval, in tones that were hollow as a tomb-born echo; and I in my turn also repeated it.

Now, in the chamber of evocation, before beginning the ritual, we had opened a small window giving upon the sea, and had likewise left open a high door on the hall to landward, lest that which came in answer to us should require a spatial mode of entrance. And during the ceremony, the sea became still and there was no wind, and it seemed that all things were hushed in awful expectation of the nameless visitor. But after all was done, and the last word had been repeated by Oigos and me, we stood and waited vainly for a visible sign or other manifestation. The lamps burned stilly in the midnight room; and no shadows fell, other than were cast by ourselves and Oigos and by the great marble women along the walls. And in the magic mirrors we had placed cunningly, to reflect those that were otherwise unseen, we beheld no breath or trace of any image.

At this, after a reasonable interim, Avyctes was sorely disappointed, deeming that the evocation had failed of its purpose; and I, having the same thought, was secretly relieved. And we questioned the mummy of Oigos, to learn if he had perceived in the room, with such senses as are peculiar to the dead, the sure token or doubtful proof of a presence undescried by us the living. And the mummy gave a necromantic answer, saying that there was nothing.

“Verily,” said Avyctes, “it were useless to wait longer. For surely in some way we have misunderstood the purport of the writing, or have failed to duplicate the matters used in the evocation, or the correct intonement of the words. Or it may be that in the lapse of so many aeons, the thing that was

formerly wont to respond has long ceased to exist, or has altered in its attributes so that the spell is now void and valueless.” To this I assented readily, hoping that the matter was at an end. So, after erasing the blood-marked triangle and the sacred ellipse of the linked Signs of Oumor, and after dismissing Oigos to his wonted place among other mummies, we retired to sleep. And in the days that followed, we resumed our habitual studies, but made no mention to each other of the strange triangular tablet or the vain formula.

Even as before, our days went on; and the sea climbed and roared in white fury on the cliffs, and the winds wailed by in their unseen, sullen wrath, bowing the dark cedars as witches are bowed by the breath of Taaran, god of evil. Almost, in the marvel of new tests and cantrips, I forgot the ineffectual conjuration, and I deemed that Avyctes had also forgotten it.

All things were as of yore, to our sorcerous perception; and there was naught to trouble us in our wisdom and power and serenity, which we deemed secure above the sovereignty of kings. Reading the horoscopic stars, we found no future ill in their aspect; nor was any shadow of bale foreshown to us through geomancy, or other modes of divination such as we employed. And our familiars, though grisly and dreadful to mortal gaze, were wholly obedient to us the masters.

Then, on a clear summer afternoon, we walked, as was often our custom, on the marble terrace behind the house. In robes of ocean-purple, we paced among the windy trees with their blown, crooked shadows; and there, following us as we went to and fro, I saw the blue shadow of Avyctes and my own shadow on the marble; and between them, an adumbration that was not wrought by any of the cedars. And I was greatly startled, but spoke not

of the matter to Avyctes, and observed the unknown shadow with covert care.

I saw that it followed closely the shadow of Avyctes, keeping ever the same distance. And it fluttered not in the wind, but moved with a flowing as of some heavy, thick, putrescent liquid; and its color was not blue nor purple nor black, nor any other hue to which man's eyes are habituated, but a hue as of some unearthly purulence; and its form was altogether monstrous, having a squat head and a long, undulant body, without similitude to beast or devil.

Avyctes heeded not the shadow; and still I feared to speak, though I thought it an ill thing for the master to be companioned thus. And I moved closer to him, in order to detect by touch or other perception the invisible presence that had cast the adumbration. But the air was void to sunward of the shadow; and I found nothing opposite the sun nor in any oblique direction, though I searched closely, knowing that certain beings cast their shadows thus.

After a while, at the customary hour, we returned by the coiling stairs and monster-flanked portals into the high house. And I saw that the strange adumbration moved ever behind the shadow of Avyctes, falling horrible and unbroken on the steps and passing clearly separate and distinct amid the long umbrages of the towering monsters. And in the dim halls beyond the sun, where shadows should not have been, I beheld with terror the distorted loathly blot, having a pestilent, unnamable hue, that followed Avyctes as if in lieu of his own extinguished shadow. And all that day, everywhere that we went, at the table served by specters, or in the mummy-warded room of volumes and books, the thing pursued Avyctes, clinging to him even as leprosy to the leper. And still the master had perceived it not; and still I

forbore to warn him, hoping that the visitant would withdraw in its own time, going obscurely as it had come.

But at midnight, when we sat together by the silver lamps, pondering the blood-writ runes of Hyperborea, I saw that the shadow had drawn closer to the shadow of Avyctes, towering behind his chair on the wall between the huge sculptured women and the mummies. And the thing was a streaming ooze of charnel pollution, a foulness beyond the black leprosy of hell; and I could bear it no more; and I cried out in my fear and loathing, and informed the master of its presence.

Beholding now the shadow, Avyctes considered it closely and in silence; and there was neither fear nor awe nor abhorrence in the deep, graven wrinkles of his visage. And he said to me at last:

“This thing is a mystery beyond my lore; but never, in all the practice of my art, has any shadow come to me unbidden. And since all others of our evocations have found answer ere this, I must deem that the shadow is a veritable entity, or the sign of an entity, that has come in belated response to the formula of the serpent-sorcerers, which we thought powerless and void. And I think it well that we should now repair to the chamber of conjuration, and interrogate the shadow in such manner as we may, to inquire its nativity and purpose.”

We went forthwith into the chamber of conjuration, and made such preparations as were both necessary and possible. And when we were prepared to question it, the unknown shadow had drawn closer still to the shadow of Avyctes, so that the clear space between the two was no wider than the thickness of a necromancer's rod.

Now, in all ways that were feasible, we interrogated the shadow, speaking through our own lips and the lips of mummies and statues. But there was no determinable answer; and calling certain of the devils and

phantoms that were our familiars, we made question through the mouths of these, but without result. And all the while, our magic mirrors were void of any reflection of a presence that might have cast the shadow; and they that had been our spokesmen could detect nothing in the room. And there was no spell, it seemed, that had power upon the visitant. So Avyctes became troubled; and drawing on the floor with blood and ashes the ellipse of Oumor, wherein no demon nor spirit may intrude, he retired to its center. But still within the ellipse, like a flowing taint of liquid corruption, the shadow followed his shadow; and the space between the two was no wider than the thickness of a wizard's pen.

Now, on the face of Avyctes, horror had graven new wrinkles; and his brow was beaded with a deathly sweat. For he knew, even as I, that this was a thing beyond all laws, and foreboding naught but disaster and evil. And he cried to me in a shaken voice, and said:

“I have no knowledge of this thing nor its intention toward me, and no power to stay its progress. Go forth and leave me now; for I would not that any man should witness the defeat of my sorcery and the doom that may follow thereupon. Also, it were well to depart while there is time, lest you too should become the quarry of the shadow and be compelled to share its menace.”

Though terror had fastened upon my inmost soul, I was loath to leave Avyctes. But I had sworn to obey his will at all times and in every respect; and moreover I knew myself doubly powerless against the adumbration, since Avyctes himself was impotent.

So, bidding him farewell, I went forth with trembling limbs from the haunted chamber; and peering back from the threshold, I saw that the alien umbrage, creeping like a noisome blotch on the floor, had touched the shadow of Avyctes. And at that moment the master shrieked aloud like one

in nightmare; and his face was no longer the face of Avyctes but was contorted and convulsed like that of some helpless madman who wrestles with an unseen incubus. And I looked no more, but fled along the dim outer hall and through the high portals giving upon the terrace.

A red moon, ominous and gibbous, had declined above the terrace and the crags; and the shadows of the cedars were elongated in the moon; and they wavered in the gale like the blown cloaks of enchanters. And stooping against the gale, I fled across the terrace toward the outer stairs that led to a steep path in the riven waste of rocks and chasms behind Avyctes' house. I neared the terrace edge, running with the speed of fear; but I could not reach the topmost outer stair; for at every step the marble flowed beneath me, fleeing like a pale horizon before the seeker. And though I raced and panted without pause, I could draw no nearer to the terrace edge.

At length I desisted, seeing that an unknown spell had altered the very space about the house of Avyctes, so that none could escape therefrom to landward. So, resigning myself in despair to whatever might befall, I returned toward the house. And climbing the white stairs in the low, level beams of the crag-caught moon, I saw a figure that awaited me in the portals. And I knew by the trailing robe of sea-purple, but by no other token, that the figure was Avyctes. For the face was no longer in its entirety the face of man, but was become a loathly fluid amalgam of human features with a thing not to be identified on earth. The transfiguration was ghastlier than death or the changes of decay; and the face was already hued with the nameless, corrupt and purulent color of the strange shadow, and had taken on, in respect to its outlines, a partial likeness to the squat profile of the shadow. The hands of the figure were not those of any terrene being; and the shape beneath the robe had lengthened with a nauseous undulant pliancy; and the face and fingers seemed to drip in the moon-light with a

deliquescent corruption. And the pursuing umbrage, like a thickly flowing blight, had corroded and distorted the very shadow of Avyctes, which was now double in a manner not to be narrated here.

Fain would I have cried or spoken aloud; but horror had dried up the fount of speech. And the thing that had been Avyctes beckoned me in silence, uttering no word from its living and putrescent lips. And with eyes that were no longer eyes, but had become an oozing abomination, it peered steadily upon me. And it clutched my shoulder closely with the soft leprosy of its fingers, and led me half-swooning with revulsion along the hall, and into that room where the mummy of Oigos, who had assisted us in the threefold incantation of the serpent-men, was stationed with several of his fellows.

By the lamps which illumed the chamber, burning with pale, still, perpetual flames, I saw that the mummies stood erect along the wall in their exanimate repose, each in his wonted place with his tall shadow beside him. But the great, gaunt shadow of Oigos on the marble wall was companioned by an adumbration similar in all respects to the evil thing that had followed the master and was now incorporate with him. I remembered that Oigos had performed his share of the ritual, and had repeated an unknown stated word in turn after Avyctes; and so I knew that the horror had come to Oigos in turn, and would wreak itself upon the dead even as on the living. For the foul, anonymous thing that we had called in our presumption could manifest itself to mortal ken in no other way than this. We had drawn it from unfathomable depths of time and space, using ignorantly a dire formula; and the thing had come at its own chosen hour, to stamp itself in abomination uttermost on the evocators.

Since then, the night has ebbed away, and a second day has gone by like a sluggish ooze of horror... I have seen the complete identification of the

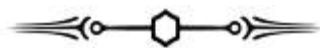
shadow with the flesh and the shadow of Avyctes... and also I have seen the slow encroachment of that other umbrage, mingling itself with the lank shadow and the sere, bituminous body of Oigos, and turning them to a similitude of the thing which Avyctes has become. And I have heard the mummy cry out like a living man in great pain and fear, as with the throes of a second dissolution, at the impingement of the shadow. And long since it has grown silent, like the other horror, and I know not its thoughts or its intent... And verily I know not if the thing that has come to us be one or several; nor if its avatar will rest complete with the three that summoned it forth into time, or be extended to others.

But these things, and much else, I shall soon know; for now, in turn, there is a shadow that follows mine, drawing ever closer. The air congeals and curdles with an unseen fear; and they that were our familiars have fled from the mansion; and the great marble women seem to tremble where they stand along the walls. But the horror that was Avyctes, and the second horror that was Oigos, have left me not, and neither do they tremble. And with eyes that are not eyes, they seem to brood and watch, waiting till I too shall become as they. And their stillness is more terrible than if they had rended me limb from limb. And there are strange voices in the wind, and alien roarings upon the sea; and the walls quiver like a thin veil in the black breath of remote abysses.

So, knowing that the time is brief, I have shut myself in the room of volumes and books and have written this account. And I have taken the bright triangular tablet, whose solution was our undoing, and have cast it from the window into the sea, hoping that none will find it after us. And now I must make an end, and enclose this writing in the sealed cylinder of orichalchum, and fling it forth to drift upon the wave. For the space

between my shadow and the shadow of the horror is straitened momentarily...
and the space is no wider than the thickness of a wizard's pen.

A Night in Malnéant



MY SOJOURN IN the city of Malnéant occurred during a period of my life no less dim and dubious than that city itself and the misty regions lying there about. I have no precise recollection of its locality, nor can I remember exactly when and how I came to visit it. But I had heard vaguely that such a place was situated along my route; and when I came to the fog-enfolded river that flows beside its walls, and heard beyond the river the mortuary tolling of many bells, I surmised that I was approaching Malnéant.

On reaching the gray, colossal bridge that crosses the river, I could have continued at will on other roads leading to remoter cities: but it seemed to me that I might as well enter Malnéant as any other place. And so it was that I set foot on the bridge of shadowy arches, under which the black waters flowed in stealthy division and were joined again in a silence as of Styx and Acheron.

That period of my life, I have said, was dim and dubious: all the more so, mayhap, because of my need for forgetfulness, my persistent and at times partially rewarded search for oblivion. And that which I needed to forget above all was the death of the lady Mariel, and the fact that I myself had slain her as surely as if I had done the deed with my own hand. For she had loved me with an affection deeper and purer and more stable than mine; and my changeable temper, my fits of cruel indifference or ferocious irritability, had broken her gentle heart. So it was that she had sought the anodyne of a lethal poison; and after she was laid to rest in the somber vaults of her ancestors, I had become a wanderer, followed and forever tortured by a belated remorse. For months, or years, I am uncertain which, I roamed from

old-world city to city, heeding little where I went if only wine and the other agents of oblivion were available... And thus I came, some while in my indefinite journeying, to the dim environs of Malnéant.

The sun (if ever there was a sun above this region) had been lost for I knew not how long in a sky of leaden vapors; the day was drear and sullen at best. But now, by the thickening of the shadows and the mist, I felt that evening must be near; and the bells I had heard, however heavy and sepulchral their tolling, gave at least the assurance of prospective shelter for the night. So I crossed the long bridge and entered the grimly yawning gate with a quickening of my footsteps even if with no alacrity of spirit.

The dusk had gathered behind the gray walls, but there were few lights in the city. Few people were abroad, and these went upon their way with a sort of solemn haste, as if on some funereal errand that would admit of no delay. The streets were narrow, the houses high, with overhanging balconies and heavily curtained or shuttered windows. All was very silent, except for the bells, which tolled recurrently, sometimes faint and far off, and sometimes with a loud and startling clangor that seemed to come almost from overhead.

As I plunged among the shadowy mansions, along the streets from which a visible twilight issued to envelop me, it seemed that I was going farther and farther away from my memories at every step. For this reason I did not at once inquire my way to a tavern but was content to lose myself more and more in the gray labyrinth of buildings, which grew vaguer and vaguer amid the ever-mounting darkness and fog, as if they were about to dissolve in oblivion.

I think that my soul would have been almost at peace with itself, if it had not been for the reiterant ringing of the bells, which were like all bells that toll for the repose of the dead, and therefore set me to remembering those

that had rung for Mariel. But whenever they ceased, my thoughts would drift back with an indolent ease, a recovered security, to the all-surrounding vagueness...

I had no idea how far I had gone in Malnéant, nor how long I had roamed among those houses that hardly seemed as if they could be peopled by any but the sleeping or the dead. At last, however, I became aware that I was very tired, and bethought me of food and wine and a lodging for the night. But nowhere in my wanderings had I noticed the sign-board of an inn; so I resolved to ask the next passer-by for the desired direction.

As I have said before, there were few people abroad. Now, when I made up my mind to address one of them, it appeared that there was no one at all; and I walked onward through street after street in my futile search for a living face.

At length I met two women, clothed in gray that was cold and dim as the folds of the fog, and veiled withal, who were hurrying along with the same funereal intentness I had perceived in all other denizens of that city. I made bold to accost them, asking if they could direct me to an inn.

Scarcely pausing or even turning their heads, they answered: 'We cannot tell you. We are shroud-weavers, and we have been busy making a shroud for the lady Mariel.'

Now, at that name, which of all names in the world was the one I should least have expected or cared to hear, an unspeakable chill invaded my heart, and a dreadful dismay smote me like the breath of the tomb. It was indeed strange that in this dim city, so far in time and space from all I had fled to escape, a woman should have recently died who was also named Mariel. The coincidence appeared so sinister, that an odd fear of the streets through which I had wandered was born suddenly in my soul. The name had evoked, with a more irrevocable fatality than the tolling of the bells, all that

I had vainly wished to forget; and my memories were like living coals in my heart.

As I went onward, with paces that had become more hurried, more feverish than those of the people of Malnéant, I met two men, who were likewise dressed from head to foot in gray; and I asked of them the same question I had asked of the shroud-weavers.

‘We cannot tell you,’ they replied. ‘We are coffin-makers, and we have been busy making a coffin for the lady Mariel.’

As they spoke, and hastened on, the bells rang out again, this time very near at hand, with a more dismal and sepulchral menace in their leaden tolling. And everything about me, the tall and misty houses, the dark, indefinite streets, the rare and wraith-like figures, became as if part of the obscure confusion and fear and bafflement of a nightmare. Moment by moment, the coincidence on which I had stumbled appeared all too bizarre for belief, and I was troubled now by the monstrous and absurd idea that the Mariel I knew had only just died, and that this fantastic city was in some unsurmisable manner connected with her death. But this, of course, my reason rejected summarily, and I kept repeating to myself: ‘The Mariel of whom they speak is another Marel.’ And it irritated me beyond all measure that a thought so enormous and ludicrous should return when my logic had dismissed it.

I met no more people of whom to inquire my way. But at length, as I fought with my shadowy perplexity and my burning memories, I found that I had paused beneath the weather-beaten sign of an inn, on which the lettering had been half effaced by time and the brown lichens. The building was obviously very old, like all the houses in Malnéant; its upper stories were lost in the swirling fog, except for a few furtive lights that glowed obscurely down; and a vague and musty odor of antiquity came forth to

greet me as I mounted the steps and tried to open the ponderous door. But the door had been locked or bolted; so I began to pound upon it with my fists to attract the attention of those within.

After much delay, the door was opened slowly and grudgingly, and a cadaverous-looking individual peered forth, frowning with portentous gravity as he saw me.

‘What do you desire?’ he queried, in tones that were both brusque and solemn.

‘A room for the night, and wine,’ I requested.

‘We cannot accommodate you. All the rooms are occupied by people who have come to attend the obsequies of the lady Mariel; and all the wine in the house has been requisitioned for their use. You will have to go elsewhere.’

He closed the door quickly upon me with the last words. I turned to resume my wanderings, and all that had troubled me before was now intensified a hundredfold. The gray mists and the grayer houses were full of the menace of memory: they were like traitorous tombs from which the cadavers of dead hours poured forth to assail me with envenomed fangs and talons. I cursed the hour when I had entered Malnéant, for it seemed to me now that in so doing I had merely completed a funereal, sinister circle through time, and had returned to the day of Mariel’s death. And certainly, all my recollections of Mariel, of her final agony and her entombment, had assumed the frightful vitality of present things. But my reason still maintained, of course, that the Mariel who lay dead somewhere in Malnéant, and for whom all these obsequial preparations were being made, was not the lady whom I had loved, but another.

After threading streets that were even darker and narrower than those before traversed, I found a second inn, bearing a similar weather-beaten

sign, and in all other respects very much like the first. The door was barred, and I knocked thereon with trepidation and was in no manner surprised when a second individual with a cadaverous face informed me in tones of sepulchral solemnity:

‘We cannot accommodate you. All the rooms have been taken by musicians and mourners who will serve at the obsequies of the lady Mariel; and all the wine has been reserved for their use.’

Now I began to dread the city about me with a manifold fear: for apparently the whole business of the people in Malnéant consisted of preparations for the funeral of this lady Mariel. And it began to be obvious that I must walk the streets of the city all night because of these same preparations. All at once, an overwhelming weariness was mingled with my nightmare terror and perplexity.

I had not long continued my peregrinations, after leaving the second inn, when the bells were tolled once more. For the first time, I found it possible to identify their source: they were in the spires of a great cathedral which loomed immediately before me through the fog. Some people were entering the cathedral, and a curiosity, which I knew to be both morbid and perilous, prompted me to follow them. Here, I somehow felt, I should be able to learn more regarding the mystery that tormented me.

All was dim within, and the light of many tapers scarcely served to illumine the vast nave and altar. Masses were being said by priests in black whose faces I could not see distinctly; and to me, their chanting was like words in a dream; and I could hear nothing, and nothing was plainly visible in all the place, except a bier of opulent fabrics on which there lay a motionless form in white. Flowers of many hues had been strewn upon the bier, and their fragrance filled the air with a drowsy languor, with an anodyne that seemed to drug my heart and brain. Such flowers had been

cast on the bier of Mariel; and even thus, at her funeral, I had been overcome by a momentary dulling of the senses because of their perfume.

Dimly I became aware that someone was at my elbow. With eyes still intent on the bier, I asked:

‘Who is it that lies yonder, for whom these masses are being said and these bells are rung?’ And a slow, sepulchral voice replied:

‘It is the lady Mariel, who died yesterday and who will be interred tomorrow in the vaults of her ancestors. If you wish, you may go forward and gaze upon her.’

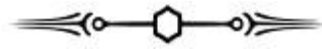
So I went down the cathedral aisle, even to the side of the bier, whose opulent fabrics trailed on the cold flags. And the face of her who lay thereon, with a tranquil smile upon the lips, and tender shadows upon the shut eyelids, was the face of the Mariel I had loved and of none other. The tides of time were frozen in their flowing; and all that was or had been or could be, all of the world that existed aside from her, became as fading shadows; and even as once before (was it eons or instants ago?) my soul was locked in the marble hell of its supreme grief and regret. I could not move, I could not cry out nor even weep, for my very tears were turned to ice. And now I knew with a terrible certitude that this one event, the death of the lady Mariel, had drawn apart from all other happenings, had broken away from the sequence of time and had found for itself a setting of appropriate gloom and solemnity; or perhaps had even built around itself the whole enormous maze of that spectral city, in which to abide my destined return among the mists of a deceptive oblivion.

At length, with an awful effort of will, I turned my eyes away; and leaving the cathedral with steps that were both hurried and leaden, I sought to find an egress from the dismal labyrinth of Malnéant to the gate by which I had entered. But this was by no means easy, and I must have roamed for

hours in alleys blind and stifling as tombs, and along the tortuous, self-reverting thoroughfares, ere I came to a familiar street and was able henceforward to direct my paces with something of surety. And a dull and sunless daylight was dawning behind the mists when I crossed the bridge and came again to the road that would lead me away from that fatal city.

Since then, I have wandered long and in many places. But never again have I cared to revisit those old-world realms of fog and mist, for fear that I should come once more to Malnéant, and find that its people are still busied with their preparations for the obsequies of the lady Mariel.

The Devotee of Evil



THE OLD LARCOM house was a mansion of considerable size and dignity, set among oaks and cypresses on the hill behind Auburn's Chinatown, in what had once been the aristocratic section of the village. At the time of which I write, it had been unoccupied for several years and had begun to present the signs of desolation and dilapidation which untenanted houses so soon display. The place had a tragic history and was believed to be haunted. I had never been able to procure any first-hand or precise accounts of the spectral manifestations that were accredited to it. But certainly it possessed all the necessary antecedents of a haunted house. The first owner, Judge Peter Larcom, had been murdered beneath its roof back in the seventies by a maniacal Chinese cook; one of his daughters had gone insane; and two other members of the family had died accidental deaths. None of them had prospered: their legend was one of sorrow and disaster.

Some later occupants, who had purchased the place from the one surviving son of Peter Larcom, had left under circumstances of inexplicable haste after a few months, moving permanently to San Francisco. They did not return even for the briefest visit; and beyond paying their taxes, they gave no attention whatever to the place. Everyone had grown to think of it as a sort of historic ruin, when the announcement came that it had been sold to Jean Averaude, of New Orleans.

My first meeting with Averaude was strangely significant, for it revealed to me, as years of acquaintance would not necessarily have done, the peculiar bias of his mind. Of course, I had already heard some odd rumors about him; his personality was too signal, his advent too mysterious, to

escape the usual fabrication and mongering of village tales. I had been told that he was extravagantly rich, that he was a recluse of the most eccentric type, that he had made certain very singular changes in the inner structure of the old house; and last, but not least, that he lived with a beautiful mulatress who never spoke to anyone and who was believed to be his mistress as well as his housekeeper. The man himself had been described to me by some as an unusual but harmless lunatic, and by others as an all-round Mephistopheles.

I had seen him several times before our initial meeting. He was a sallow, saturnine Creole, with the marks of race in his hollow cheeks and feverish eyes. I was struck by his air of intellect, and by the fiery fixity of his gaze — the gaze of a man who is dominated by one idea to the exclusion of all else. Some medieval alchemist, who believed himself to be on the point of attaining his objective after years of unrelenting research, might have looked as he did.

I was in the Auburn library one day, when Averaude entered. I had taken a newspaper from one of the tables and was reading the details of an atrocious crime — the murder of a woman and her two infant children by the husband and father, who had locked his victims in a clothes-closet, after saturating their garments with oil. He had left the woman's apron-string caught in the shut door, with the end protruding, and had set fire to it like a fuse.

Averaude passed the table where I was reading. I looked up, and saw his glance at the headlines of the paper I held. A moment later he returned and sat down beside me, saying in a low voice:

“What interests me in a crime of that sort, is the implication of unhuman forces behind it. Could any man, on his own initiative, have conceived and executed anything so gratuitously fiendish?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, somewhat surprised by the question and by my interrogator. “There are terrifying depths in human nature — more abhorrent than those of the jungle.”

“I agree. But how could such impulses, unknown to the most brutal progenitors of man, have been implanted in his nature, unless through some ulterior agency?”

“You believe, then, in the existence of an evil force or entity — a Satan or an Ahriman?”

“I believe in evil — how can I do otherwise when I see its manifestations everywhere? I regard it as an all-controlling power; but I do not think that the power is personal in the sense of what we know as personality. A Satan? No. What I conceive is a sort of dark vibration, the radiation of a black sun, of a center of malignant eons — a radiation that can penetrate like any other ray — and perhaps more deeply. But probably I don’t make my meaning clear at all.”

I protested that I understood him; but, after his burst of communicativeness, he seemed oddly disinclined to pursue the conversation. Evidently he had been prompted to address me; and no less evidently, he regretted having spoken with so much freedom. He arose; but before leaving, he said:

“I am Jean Averaude — perhaps you have heard of me. You are Philip Hastane, the novelist. I have read your books and I admire them. Come and see me sometime — we may have certain tastes in common.”

Averaude’s personality, the conception he had avowed, and the intense interest and value which he so obviously attached to these conceptions, made a singular impression on my mind, and I could not forget him. When, a few days later, I met him on the street and he repeated his invitation with a cordialness that was unfeignedly sincere, I could do no less than accept. I

was interested, though not altogether attracted, by his bizarre, well-nigh morbid individuality, and was impelled by a desire to learn more concerning him. I sensed a mystery of no common order — a mystery with elements of the abnormal and the uncanny.

The grounds of the old Larcom place were precisely as I remembered them, though I had not found occasion to pass them for some time. They were a veritable tangle of Cherokee rose-vines, arbutus, lilac, ivy and crepe-myrtle, half overshadowed by the great cypresses and somber evergreen oaks. There was a wild, half-sinister charm about them — the charm of rampancy and ruin. Nothing had been done to put the place in order, and there were no outward repairs in the house itself, where the white paint of bygone years was being slowly replaced by mosses and lichens that flourished beneath the eternal umbrage of the trees. There were signs of decay in the roof and pillars of the front porch; and I wondered why the new owner, who was reputed to be so rich, had not already made the necessary restorations.

I raised the gargoyle-shaped knocker and let it fall with a dull, lugubrious clang. The house remained silent; and I was about to knock again, when the door opened slowly and I saw for the first time the mulatress of whom so many village rumors had reached me.

The woman was more exotic than beautiful, with fine, mournful eyes and bronze-colored features of a semi-negroid irregularity. Her figure, though, was truly perfect, with the curving lines of a lyre and the supple grace of some feline animal. When I asked for Jean Averaude, she merely smiled and made signs for me to enter. I surmised at once that she was dumb.

Waiting in the gloomy library to which she conducted me, I could not refrain from glancing at the volumes with which the shelves were congested. They were an ungodly jumble of tomes that dealt with

anthropology, ancient religions, demonology, modern science, history, psychoanalysis and ethics. Interspersed with these were a few romances and volumes of poetry. Beausobre's monograph on Manichaeism was flanked with Byron and Poe; and "Les Fleurs du Mal" jostled a late treatise on chemistry.

Averaud entered, after several minutes, apologizing profusely for his delay. He said that he had been in the midst of certain labors when I came; but he did not specify the nature of these labors. He looked even more hectic and fiery-eyed than when I had seen him last. He was patently glad to see me, and eager to talk.

"You have been looking at my books," he observed immediately. "Though you might not think so at first glance, on account of their seeming diversity, I have selected them all with a single object: the study of evil in all its aspects, ancient, medieval and modern. I have traced it in the religions and demonologies of all peoples; and, more than this, in human history itself. I have found it in the inspiration of poets and romancers who have dealt with the darker impulses, emotion and acts of man. Your novels have interested me for this reason: you are aware of the baneful influences which surround us, which so often sway or actuate us. I have followed the working of these agencies even in chemical reactions, in the growth and decay of trees, flowers, minerals. I feel that the processes of physical decomposition, as well as the similar mental and moral processes, are due entirely to them.

"In brief, I have postulated a monistic evil, which is the source of all death, deterioration, imperfection, pain, sorrow, madness and disease. This evil, so feebly counteracted by the powers of good, allures and fascinates me above all things. For a long time past, my life-work has been to

ascertain its true nature, and trace it to its fountain-head. I am sure that somewhere in space there is the center from which all evil emanates.”

He spoke with a wild air of excitement, of morbid and semi-maniacal intensity. His obsession convinced me that he was more or less unbalanced; but there was an unholy logic in the development of his ideas; and I could not but recognize a certain disordered brilliancy and range of intellect.

Scarcely waiting for me to reply, he continued his monologue:

“I have learned that certain localities and buildings, certain arrangements of natural or artificial objects, are more favorable to the reception of evil influences than others. The laws that determine the degree of receptivity are still obscure to me; but at least I have verified the fact itself. As you know, there are houses or neighbourhoods notorious for a succession of crimes or misfortunes; and there are also articles, such as certain jewels, whose possession is accompanied by disaster. Such places and things are receivers of evil... I have a theory, however, that there is always more or less interference with the direct flow of the malignant force; and that pure, absolute evil has never yet been manifested.

“By the use of some device which would create a proper field or form a receiving station, it should be possible to evoke this absolute evil. Under such conditions, I am sure that the dark vibration would become a visible and tangible thing, comparable to light or electricity.” He eyed me with a gaze that was disconcertingly exigent. Then:

“I will confess that I have purchased this old mansion and its grounds mainly on account of their baleful history. The place is unusually liable to the influences of which I have spoken. I am now at work on an apparatus by means of which, when it is perfected, I hope to manifest in their essential purity the radiations of malign force.”

At this moment, the mulatress entered and passed through the room on some household errand. I thought that she gave Averaude a look of maternal tenderness, watchfulness and anxiety. He, on his part seemed hardly to be aware of her presence, so engrossed was he in the strange ideas and the stranger project he had been expounding. However, when she had gone, he remarked:

“That is Fifine, the one human being who is really attached to me. She is mute, but highly intelligent and affectionate. All my people, an old Louisiana family, are long departed... and my wife is doubly dead to me.” A spasm of obscure pain contracted his features, and vanished. He resumed his monologue; and at no future time did he again refer to the presumably tragic tale at which he had hinted: a tale in which, I sometimes suspect, were hidden the seeds of the strange moral and mental perversion which he was to manifest more and more.

I took my leave, after promising to return for another talk. Of course, I considered now that Averaude was a madman; but his madness was of a most uncommon and picturesque variety. It seemed significant that he should have chosen me for a confidant. All others who met him found him uncommunicative and taciturn to an extreme degree. I suppose he had felt the ordinary human need of unburdening himself to someone; and had selected me as the only person in the neighborhood who was potentially sympathetic.

I saw him several times during the month that followed. He was indeed a strange psychological study; and I encouraged him to talk without reserve — though such encouragement was hardly necessary. There was much that he told me — a strange medley of the scientific and the mystic. I assented tactfully to all that he said, but ventured to point out the possible dangers of his evocative experiments, if they should prove successful. To this, with the

fervor of an alchemist or a religious devotee, he replied that it did not matter — that he was prepared to accept any and all consequences.

More than once he gave me to understand that his invention was progressing favorably. And one day he said, with abruptness:

“I will show you my mechanism, if you care to see it.” I protested my eagerness to view the invention, and he led me forthwith into a room to which I had not been admitted before. The chamber was large, triangular in form, and tapestried with curtains of some sullen black fabric. It had no windows. Clearly, the internal structure of the house had been changed in making it; and all the queer village tales, emanating from carpenters who had been hired to do the work, were now explained. Exactly in the center of the room, there stood on a low tripod of brass the apparatus of which Averaude had so often spoken.

The contrivance was quite fantastic, and presented the appearance of some new, highly complicated musical instrument. I remember that there were many wires of varying thickness, stretched on a series of concave sounding-boards of some dark, unlustrous metal; and above these, there depended from three horizontal bars a number of square, circular and triangular gongs. Each of these appeared to be made of a different material; some were bright as gold, or translucent as jade; others were black and opaque as jet. A small hammer-like instrument hung opposite each gong, at the end of a silver wire.

Averaude proceeded to expound the scientific basis of his mechanism. The vibrational properties of the gongs, he said, were designed to neutralize with their sound-pitch all other cosmic vibrations than those of evil. He dwelt at much length on this extravagant theorem, developing it in a fashion oddly lucid. He ended his peroration:

“I need one more gong to complete the instrument; and this I hope to invent very soon. The triangular room, draped in black, and without windows, forms the ideal setting for my experiment. Apart from this room, I have not ventured to make any change in the house or its grounds, for fear of deranging some propitious element or collocation of elements.”

More than ever, I thought that he was mad. And, though he had professed on many occasions to abhor the evil which he planned to evoke, I felt an inverted fanaticism in his attitude. In a less scientific age he would have been a devil-worshipper, a partaker in the abominations of the Black Mass; or would have given himself to the study and practice of sorcery. His was a religious soul that had failed to find good in the scheme of things; and lacking it, was impelled to make of evil itself an object of secret reverence.

“I fear that you think me insane,” he observed in a sudden flash of clairvoyance. “Would you like to watch an experiment? Even though my invention is not completed, I may be able to convince you that my design is not altogether the fantasy of a disordered brain.”

I consented. He turned on the lights in the dim room. Then he went to an angle of the wall and pressed a hidden spring or switch. The wires on which the tiny hammers were strung began to oscillate, till each of the hammers touched lightly its companion gong. The sound they made was dissonant and disquieting to the last degree — a diabolic percussion unlike anything I have ever heard, and exquisitely painful to the nerves. I felt as if a flood of finely broken glass was pouring into my ears.

The swinging of the hammers grew swifter and heavier; but, to my surprise, there was no corresponding increase of loudness in the sound. On the contrary, the clangor became slowly muted, till it was no more than an undertone which seemed to be coming from an immense depth or distance

— an undertone still full of disquietude and torment, like the sobbing of far-off winds in hell, or the murmur of demonian fires on coasts of eternal ice.

Said Averaude at my elbow:

“To a certain extent, the combined notes of the gongs are beyond human hearing in their pitch. With the addition of the final gong, even less sound will be audible.”

While I was trying to digest this difficult idea, I noticed a partial dimming of the light above the tripod and its weird apparatus. A vertical shaft of faint shadow, surrounded by a still fainter penumbra, was forming in the air. The tripod itself, and the wires, gongs and hammers, were now a trifle indistinct, as if seen through some obscuring veil. The central shaft and its penumbra seemed to widen; and looking down at the flood, where the outer adumbration, conforming to the room’s outline, crept toward the walls, I saw that Averaude and myself were now within its ghostly triangle.

At the same time there surged upon me an intolerable depression, together with a multitude of sensations which I despair of conveying in language. My very sense of space was distorted and deformed as if some unknown dimension had somehow been mingled with those familiar to us. There was a feeling of dreadful and measureless descent, as if the floor were sinking beneath me into some nether pit; and I seemed to pass beyond the room in a torrent of swirling, hallucinative images, visible but invisible, felt but intangible, and more awful, more accursed than that hurricane of lost souls beheld by Dante.

Down, down, I appeared to go, in the bottomless and phantom hell that was impinging upon reality. Death, decay, malignity, madness, gathered in the air and pressed me down like Satanic incubi in that ecstatic horror of descent. I felt that there were a thousand forms, a thousand faces about me, summoned from the gulfs of perdition. And yet I saw nothing but the white

face of Averaude, stamped with a frozen and abominable rapture as he fell beside me.

Like a dreamer who forces himself to awaken, he began to move away from me. I seemed to lose sight of him for a moment in the cloud of nameless, immaterial horrors that threatened to take on the further horror of substance. Then I realized that Averaude had turned off the switch, and that the oscillating hammers had ceased to beat on those infernal gongs. The double shaft of shadow faded in mid-air, the burden of terror and despair lifted from my nerves and I no longer felt the damnable hallucination of nether space and descent.

“My God!” I cried. “What was it?” Averaude’s look was full of a ghastly, gloating exultation as he turned to me.

“You saw and felt it, then?” he queried— “that vague, imperfect manifestation of the perfect evil which exists somewhere in the cosmos? I shall yet call it forth in its entirety, and know the black, infinite, reverse raptures which attend its epiphany.”

I recoiled from him with an involuntary shudder. All the hideous things that had swarmed upon me beneath the cacophonous beating of those accursed gongs, drew near again for an instant; and I looked with fearful vertigo into hells of perversity and corruption. I saw an inverted soul, despairing of good, which longed for the baleful ecstasies of perdition. No longer did I think him merely mad: for I knew the thing which he sought and could attain; and I remembered, with a new significance, that line of Baudelaire’s poem— “The hell wherein my heart delights.”

Averaude was unaware of my revulsion, in his dark rhapsody. When I turned to leave, unable to bear any longer the blasphemous atmosphere of that room, and the sense of strange depravity which emanated from its owner, he pressed me to return as soon as possible.

“I think,” he exulted, “that all will be in readiness before long. I want you to be present in the hour of my triumph.”

I do not know what I said, nor what excuses I made to get away from him. I longed to assure myself that a world of unblasted sunlight and undefiled air could still exist. I went out; but a shadow followed me; and execrable faces leered or mowed from the foliage as I left the cypress-shaded grounds.

For days afterward I was in a condition verging upon neurotic disorder. No one could come as close as I had been to the primal effluence of evil, and go thence unaffected. Shadowy noisome cobwebs draped themselves on all my thoughts, and presences of unlineamented fear, of shapeless horror, crouched in the half-lit corners of my mind but would never fully declare themselves. An invisible gulf, bottomless as Malebolge, seemed to yawn before me wherever I went.

Presently, though, my reason reasserted itself, and I wondered if my sensations in the black triangular room had not been wholly a matter of suggestion or auto-hypnosis. I asked myself if it were credible that a cosmic force of the sort postulated by Averaud could really exist; or, granting it existed, could be evoked by any man through the absurd intermediation of a musical device. The nervous terrors of my experience faded a little in memory; and, though a disturbing doubt still lingered, I assured myself that all I had felt was of purely subjective origin. Even then, it was with supreme reluctance, with an inward shrinking only to be overcome by violent resolve, that I returned to visit Averaud once more.

For an even longer period than usual, no one answered my knock. Then there were hurrying footsteps, and the door was opened abruptly by Fifine. I knew immediately that something was amiss, for her face wore a look of unnatural dread and anxiety, and her eyes were wide, with the whites

showing blankly, as if she gazed upon horrific things. She tried to speak, and made that ghastly inarticulate sound which the mute is able to make on occasion as she plucked my sleeve and drew me after her along the somber hall to the triangular room.

The door was open; and as I approached it, I heard a low, dissonant, snarling murmur, which I recognized as the sound of the gongs. It was like the voice of all the souls in a frozen hell, uttered by lips congealing slowly toward the ultimate torture of silence. It sank and sank till it seemed to be issuing from pits below the nadir.

Fifine shrank back on the threshold, imploring me with a pitiful glance to precede her. The lights were all turned on and Averaude, clad in a strange medieval costume, in a black gown and cap such as Faustus might have worn, stood near the percussive mechanism. The hammers were all beating with a frenzied rapidity; and the sound became still lower and tenser as I approached. Averaude did not seem to see me: his eyes, abnormally dilated, and flaming with infernal luster like those of one possessed, were fixed upon something in mid-air.

Again the soul-congealing hideousness, the sense of eternal falling, of myriad harpy-like incumbent horrors, rushed upon me as I looked and saw. Vaster and stronger than before, a double column of triangular shadow had materialized and was becoming more and more distinct. It swelled, it darkened, it enveloped the gong-apparatus and towered to the ceiling. The double column grew solid and opaque as ebony; and the face of Averaude, who was standing well within the broad penumbral shadow, became dim as if seen through a film of Stygian water.

I must have gone utterly mad for a while. I remember only a teeming delirium of things too frightful to be endured by a sane mind, that peopled the infinite gulf of hell-born illusion into which I sank with the hopeless

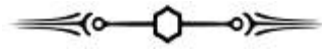
precipitancy of the damned. There was a sickness inexpressible, a vertigo of redeemless descent, a pandemonium of ghoulish phantoms that reeled and swayed about the column of malign omnipotent force which presided over all. Averaude was only one more phantom in this delirium, when with arms outstretched in his perverse adoration, he stepped toward the inner column and passed into it till he was lost to view. And Fifine was another phantom when she ran by me to the wall and turned off the switch that operated those demoniacal hammers.

As one who re-emerges from a swoon, I saw the fading of the dual pillar, till the light was no longer sullied by any tinge of that satanic radiation. And where it had been, Averaude still stood beside the baleful instrument he had designed. Erect and rigid he stood, in a strange immobility; and I felt an incredulous horror, a chill awe, as I went forward and touched him with a faltering hand. For that which I saw and touched was no longer a human being but an ebon statue, whose face and brow and fingers were black as the Faust-like raiment or the sullen curtains. Charred as by sable fire, or frozen by black cold, the features bore the eternal ecstasy and pain of Lucifer in his ultimate hell of ice. For an instant, the supreme evil which Averaude had worshipped so madly, which he had summoned from the vaults of incalculable space, had made him one with itself; and passing, it had left him petrified into an image of its own essence. The form that I touched was harder than marble; and I knew that it would endure to all time as a testimony of the infinite Medusean power that is death and corruption and darkness.

Fifine had now thrown herself at the feet of the image and was clasping its insensible knees. With her frightful muted moaning in my ears, I went forth for the last time from that chamber and from that mansion. Vainly, through delirious months and madness-ridden years, I have tried to shake

off the infrangible obsession of my memories. But there is a fatal numbness in my brain as if it too had been charred and blackened a little in that moment of overpowering nearness to the dark ray of the black statue that was Jean Averaude, the impress of awful and forbidden things has been set like an everlasting seal.

The Willow Landscape



THE PICTURE WAS more than five hundred years old; and time had not changed its colors, unless to touch them with the mellow softness of ancient hours, with the gathering morbidezza of bygone things. It had been painted by a great artist of the Sung dynasty, on silk of the finest weave, and mounted on rollers of ebony tipped with silver. For twelve generations it had been one of the most cherished possessions of the forefathers of Shih Liang. And it was equally cherished by Shih Liang himself, who, like all his ancestors, was a scholar, a poet, and a lover of both art and nature. Often, in his dreamiest or most meditative moods, he would unroll the painting and gaze upon its idyllic loveliness with the feeling of one who retires to the seclusion and remoteness of a mountain-warded valley. It consoled him in a measure for the bustle and blare and intrigue of the imperial court, where he held an official post of no small honor; since he was not altogether native to such things and would have preferred, like the olden sages, the philosophic peace of a leaf-embowered hermitage.

The picture represented a pastoral scene of the most ideal and visionary beauty. In the background arose lofty mountains rendered vague by the slow withdrawal of morning mists; in the foreground there ran a little stream, descending in mimic turbulence to a tranquil lake, and crossed on its way by a rustic bridge of bamboo, more charming than if it were made of royal lacquer. Beyond the stream and around the lake were willows of vernal green more lovely and delicious than anything that was ever beheld except in vision or memory. Incomparable was their grace, ineffable their waving: they were like the willows of Shou Shan, the Taoist Paradise; and they

trailed their foliage as leaning women trail their unbound hair. And partly hidden among them was a tiny hut; and a maiden dressed in peony pink and white was crossing the little bamboo bridge. But somehow the picture was more than a painting, was more than a veritable scene: it possessed the enchantment of far-off things for which the heart has longed in vain, of years and of places that are lost beyond recall. Surely the artist had mingled with its hues the diviner iris of dream or of retrospect, and the wine-sweet tears of a nostalgia long denied.

Shih Liang felt that he knew the landscape more intimately than any actual scene. Each time that he gazed upon it, his sensations were those of a returning wanderer. It became to him the cool and sequestered retreat in which he found a never-failing refuge from the weariness of his days. And though he was of an ascetic turn and had never married nor sought the company of women, the presence of the peony maiden on the bridge was by no means exceptionable: in fact, her tiny figure, with its more than mortal charm, was somehow an essential part of the composition and was no less important to its perfection than the stream, the willows, the lake, and the far-off mountains with their riven veils of mist. And she seemed to companion him in the visits and sojournings of reverie, when he would imagine himself repairing to the little hut or roaming beneath the delicate foliage.

In truth, Shih Liang had need of such refuge and of such companionship, illusory though they were. For, aside from his younger brother, Po Lung, a boy of sixteen, he was alone and without living relatives or comrades; and the fortunes of the family, declining through several generations, had left him the heritor of many debts and little cash or property, except a number of priceless art-treasures. His life was increasingly sad, and oppressed by ill-health and poverty; for much of the stipend from his secretarial post at the

court was necessarily devoted to the cancelling of inherited obligations; and the remainder was barely enough for his own sustenance and the education of his brother.

Shih Liang was approaching middle-age; and his honorable heart was rejoicing over the payment of the last family debt, when there came a fresh stroke of misfortune. Through no fault or remissness of his own, but the machinations of an envious fellow-scholar, Shih Liang was suddenly deprived of his position and found himself without means of support. No other position offered itself; for a certain amount of unmerited disgrace was attached to the imperial dismissal. In order to procure the necessities of life, and continue his brother's education, Shih Liang was now forced to sell one by one many of the irreplaceable heirlooms, the antique carvings of jade and ivory, the rare porcelains and paintings of the ancestral collection. This he did with extreme reluctance, with a sense of utter shame and profanation, such as could be felt only by a true lover of such things, and by one whose very soul was consecrated to the past and to the memory of his fathers.

The days and years went by, the collection dwindled piece by piece; and the time drew near when the studies of Po Lung would be completed, when he would be a scholar versed in all the classics and eligible for a position of both honor and profit. But, alas! the porcelains and lacquers, the jades and ivories had all been sold; and the paintings were likewise gone, all except the willow landscape so dearly cherished by Shih Liang.

A mortal and inassuageable sorrow, a dismay that was colder than the chill of death itself, entered the heart of Shih Liang when he realized the truth. It seemed to him that he could no longer live if he should sell the picture. But if he did not sell it, how could he complete the fraternal duty which he owed to Po Lung. There was but one possible course; and he sent word at once to the Mandarin Mung Li, a connoisseur who had purchased

other pieces of the old collection, telling him that the willow picture was now for sale.

Mung Li had long coveted this picture. He came in person, his eyes gleaming in his fat face with the avidity of a collector who scents a bargain; and the transaction was soon concluded. The money was paid immediately; but Shih Liang begged leave to retain the picture for another day before delivering it to the mandarin. And knowing that Shih Liang was a man of honor, Mung Li assented readily to this request.

When the mandarin had gone, Shih Liang unrolled the landscape and hung it on the wall. His stipulation to Mung Li had been prompted by the irresistible feeling that he must have one more hour of communion with the beloved scene, must repair once more in reverie to its inviolate retreat. After that, he would be as one without a home or a sanctuary; for he knew that in all the world there was nothing that could take the place of the willow picture or afford a like asylum for his dreams.

The mellowing rays of earliest eventide were sifted upon the silk volumen where it hung on the bare wall; but for Shih Liang, the painting was steeped in a light of supernal enchantment, was touched by more than the muted splendor of the falling sun. And it seemed to him that never before had the foliage been so tender with immortal spring, or the mist about the mountain so glamorous with eternally dissolving opal, or the maiden upon the rustic bridge so lovely with unfading youth. And somehow, by an unaccountable sorcery of perspective, the painting itself was larger and deeper than of yore, and had mysteriously assumed even more of reality, or the illusion of an actual place.

With unshed tears in his heart, like an exile who bids farewell to his natal valley, Shih Liang enjoyed the sorrowful luxury of looking upon the willow picture for the last time. Even as on a thousand former occasions, his fancy

strayed beneath the branches and beside the mere, it inhabited the tiny hut whose roof was so tantalizingly revealed and concealed, it peered at the mountain-tops from behind the trailing foliage, or paused upon the bridge to converse with the peony maiden.

And now there happened a strange and inexplicable thing. Though the sun had gone down while Shih Liang continued to gaze and dream, and a twilight had gathered in the room, the picture itself was no less plain and luminous than before, as if it were lit by another sun than that of contemporary time and space. And the landscape had grown even larger, till it seemed to Shih Liang that he was looking through an open door on the veritable scene itself.

Then, as bewilderment assailed him, he heard a whisper that was not an actual voice, but which seemed to emanate from the landscape and become audible as a thought in his inmost mind. And the whisper said:

“Because you have loved me so long and so dearly, and because your heart is native here but alien to all the world beside, it is now permitted that I should become for you the inviolable refuge of which you have dreamed, and a place wherein you can wander and abide forever.”

So, with the surpassing joy of one whose fondest vision has been verified, the rapture of one who inherits the heaven of his reverie, Shih Liang passed from the twilight room into the morning picture. And the ground was soft with a flower-embroidered grass beneath his heel; and the leaves of the willows murmured in an April wind that blew from long ago; and he saw the door of the half-hidden hut as he had never seen it before except in fancy; and the peony maiden smiled and answered his greeting when he approached her; and her voice was like the speech of the willows and the blossoms.

The disappearance of Shih Liang was a matter of brief and passing concern to those who had known him. It was readily believed that his financial sorrows had driven him to suicide, probably by drowning in the great river that ran athwart the capital.

Po Lung, having received the money left by his brother from the sale of the last painting, was enabled to finish his education; and the willow landscape, which had been found hanging on the wall of Shih Liang's abode, was duly claimed by the Mandarin Mung Li, its purchaser.

Mung Li was delighted with his acquisition; but there was one detail which puzzled him considerably when he unrolled the volumen and examined it. He could remember only one figure, a maiden in pink and white, on the little bamboo bridge; and now there were two figures! Mung Li inspected the second figure with much curiosity, and was more than surprised when he noted that it had a singular resemblance to Shih Liang. But it was very tiny, like that of the maiden; and his eyes were dim from peering at so many porcelains and lacquers and paintings; so he could not be entirely sure. At any rate, the picture was very old; and he must have been mistaken about the number of the figures. However, it was undeniably peculiar.

Mung Li might have thought the matter stiff stranger, if he had looked more often at the painting. He might have found that the peony maiden and the person who resembled Shih Liang were sometimes engaged in other diversions than that of merely passing the time of day on the bamboo bridge!

Out of Space and Time (1942)



Smith's second collection of tales, *Out of Space and Time*, was released in 1942 and was the third book published by Arkham House. The stories for this volume were selected by the author and were considered to be his best fantasy and horror stories to date. It contains stories from his major story cycles of Averroigne, Hyperborea, Poseidonis, and Zothique. Smith had wanted to call the collection "The End of the Story and Other Stories", but relented to the publisher Derleth's suggestion, an allusion to Edgar Allan Poe's "Dream-Land".

The collection features Smith's two most famous creations, *The City of the Singing Flame* and *The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis*. The former was written in January 1931 and appeared in the science fiction magazine *Wonder Stories*. It combines science fiction with elements of fantasy, and was so successful that he wrote a sequel under the title *Beyond the Singing Flame*, which was completed in June 1931. The first-person narrator Philip Hastane reports on the disappearance of the writer Giles Angarth and his friend Ebbonly, about which numerous newspaper articles speculate on the mystery. After Angarth reappears, Hastane presents his diary, which reveals a seemingly fantastic story. Angarth had taken a hike through the northern California mountainous landscape of Crater Ridge, not far from the summit near his log cabin. As he wanders through a field in search of curiously shaped stones, he notices a strange constellation. Two boulders resemble each other and are reminiscent of the bases of old columns that have almost completely weathered over time. He loses his balance and falls into a black abyss. Unwittingly, he has discovered a doorway into another dimension,

which leads to mystifying and fearful adventures. The story attracted enthusiastic reactions and impressed various authors of fantastic literature, including H. P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison.

The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis appeared in *Weird Tales* in 1932 and is the first person account of Rodney Severn, the sole surviving member of an expedition to Yoh-Vombis, an ancient and deserted city on the planet Mars – an expedition that we are at once told ended in tragedy. Smith's pioneering portrayal of life on Mars would become hugely influential to later science fiction authors. Gradually, we learn the details of the events that led to the demise of everyone in the group, except for the narrator, who himself hopes to die in order to escape "the compulsion of the malignant and malevolent virus which is permeating my brain." We also learn of the horrific ghost-like leeches that had exterminated the ancient citizens and now feast upon the doomed members of the expedition. Unlike many tales in the genre of Weird fiction, *The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis* is very accessible, replete with luxuriant language, an aura of dread, sardonic irony and spine-tingling horror.



The first edition

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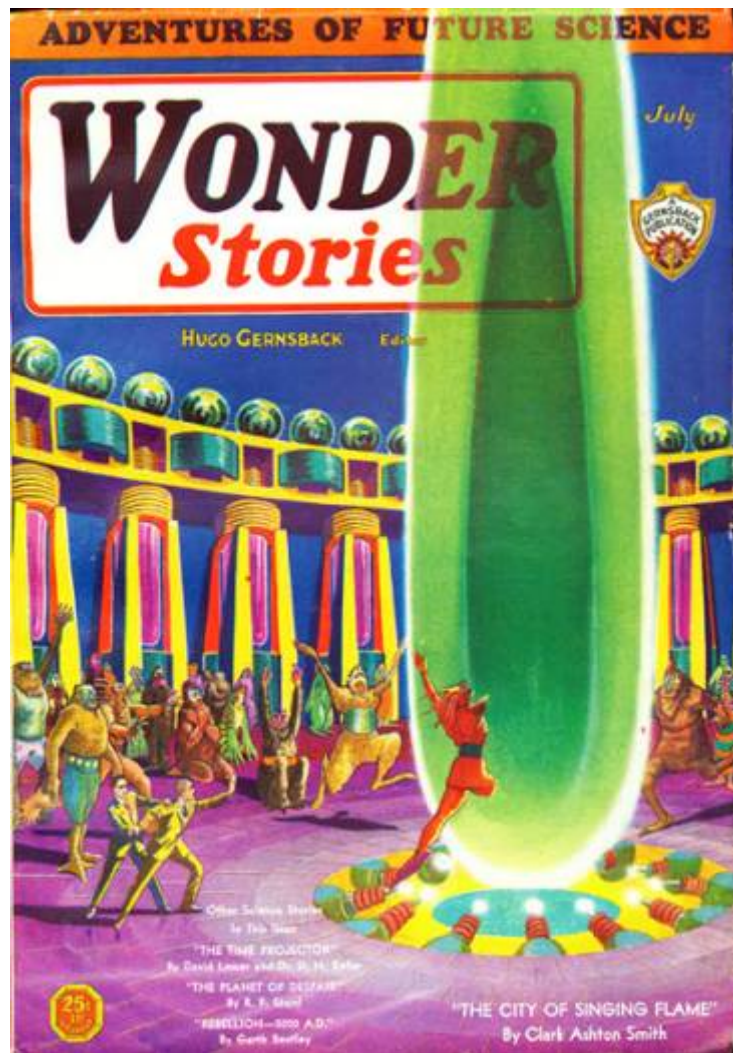
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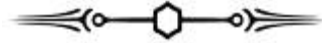


Wonder Stories, July 1931, which contained Smith's most famous story, 'The City of the Singing Flame' — the featured story in the cover illustration.



'Weird Tales', May 1932, which featured "The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis"

The End of the Story



THE FOLLOWING NARRATIVE was found among the papers of Christophe Morand, a young law-student of Tours, after his unaccountable disappearance during a visit at his father's home near Moulins, in November, 1798:

A sinister brownish-purple autumn twilight, made premature by the imminence of a sudden thunderstorm, had filled the forest of Averaigne. The trees along my road were already blurred to ebon masses, and the road itself, pale and spectral before me in the thickening gloom, seemed to waver and quiver slightly, as with the tremor of some mysterious earthquake. I spurred my horse, who was woefully tired with a journey begun at dawn, and had fallen hours ago to a protesting and reluctant trot, and we galloped adown the darkening road between enormous oaks that seemed to lean toward us with boughs like clutching fingers as we passed.

With dreadful rapidity, the night was upon us, the blackness became a tangible clinging veil; a nightmare confusion and desperation drove me to spur my mount again with a more cruel rigor; and now, as we went, the first far-off mutter of the storm mingled with the clatter of my horse's hoofs, and the first lightning flashes illumed our way, which, to my amazement (since I believed myself on the main highway through Averaigne), had inexplicably narrowed to a well-trodden footpath. Feeling sure that I had gone astray, but not caring to retrace my steps in the teeth of darkness and the towering clouds of the tempest, I hurried on, hoping, as seemed reasonable, that a path so plainly worn would lead eventually to some house or chateau,

where I could find refuge for the night. My hope was wellfounded, for within a few minutes I descried a glimmering light through the forest-boughs, and came suddenly to an open glade, where, on a gentle eminence, a large building loomed, with several little windows in the lower story, and a top that was well-nigh indistinguishable against the bulks of driven cloud.

‘Doubtless a monastery,’ I thought, as I drew rein, and descending from my exhausted mount, lifted the heavy brazen knocker in the form of a dog’s head and let it fall on the oaken door. The sound was unexpectedly loud and sonorous, with a reverberation almost sepulchral, and I shivered involuntarily, with a sense of startlement, of unwonted dismay. This, a moment later, was wholly dissipated when the door was thrown open and a tall, ruddyfeatured monk stood before me in the cheerful glow of the cressets that illumed a capacious hallway.

‘I bid you welcome to the abbey of Perigon,’ he said, in a suave rumble, and even as he spoke, another robed and hooded figure appeared and took my horse in charge. As I murmured my thanks and acknowledgments, the storm broke and tremendous gusts of rain, accompanied by evernearing peals of thunder, drove with demoniac fury on the door that had closed behind me.

“It is fortunate that you found us when you did,” observed my host. “Twere ill for man and beast to be abroad in such a hell-brew.”

Divining without question that I was hungry as well as tired, he led me to the refectory and set before me a bountiful meal of mutton, brown bread, lentils and a strong excellent red wine.

He sat opposite me at the refectory table while I ate, and, with my hunger a little mollified, I took occasion to scan him more attentively. He was both tall and stoutly built, and his features, where the brow was no less broad than the powerful jaw, betokened intellect as well as a love for good living.

A certain delicacy and refinement, an air of scholarship, of good taste and good breeding, emanated from him, and I thought to myself: 'This monk is probably a connoisseur of books as well as of wines.' Doubtless my expression betrayed the quickening of my curiosity, for he said, as if in answer:

'I am Hilaire, the abbot of Perigon. We are a Benedictine order, who live in amity with God and with all men, and we do not hold that the spirit is to be enriched by the mortification or impoverishment of the body. We have in our butteries an abundance of wholesome fare, in our cellars the best and oldest vintages of the district of Averroigne. And, if such things interest you, as mayhap they do, we have a library that is stocked with rare tomes, with precious manuscripts, with the finest works of heathendom and Christendom, even to certain unique writings that survived the holocaust of Alexandria.'

'I appreciate your hospitality,' I said, bowing. 'I am Christophe Morand, a law-student, on my way home from Tours to my father's estate near Moulins. I, too, am a lover of books, and nothing would delight me more than the privilege of inspecting a library so rich and curious as the one whereof you speak.'

Forthwith, while I finished my meal, we fell to discussing the classics, and to quoting and capping passages from Latin, Greek or Christian authors. My host, I soon discovered, was a scholar of uncommon attainments, with an erudition, a ready familiarity with both ancient and modern literature that made my own seem as that of the merest beginner by comparison. He, on his part, was so good as to commend my far from perfect Latin, and by the time I had emptied my bottle of red wine we were chatting familiarly like old friends.

All my fatigue had now flown, to be succeeded by a rare sense of well-being, of physical comfort combined with mental alertness and keenness. So, when the abbot suggested that we pay a visit to the library, I assented with alacrity.

He led me down a long corridor, on each side of which were cells belonging to the brothers of the order, and unlocked, with a huge brazen key that depended from his girdle, the door of a great room with lofty ceiling and several deep-set windows. Truly, he had not exaggerated the resources of the library; for the long shelves were overcrowded with books, and many volumes were piled high on the tables or stacked in corners. There were rolls of papyrus, of parchment, of vellum; there were strange Byzantine or Coptic bibles; there were old Arabic and Persian manuscripts with floriated or jewel-studded covers; there were scores of incunabula from the first printing-presses; there were innumerable monkish copies of antique authors, bound in wood or ivory, with rich illuminations and lettering that was often in itself a work of art.

With a care that was both loving and meticulous, the abbot Hilaire brought out volume after volume for my inspection. Many of them I had never seen before; some were unknown to me even by fame or rumor. My excited interest, my unfeigned enthusiasm, evidently pleased him, for at length he pressed a hidden spring in one of the library tables and drew out a long drawer, in which, he told me, were certain treasures that he did not care to bring forth for the edification or delectation of many, and whose very existence was undreamed of by the monks.

‘Here,’ he continued, ‘are three odes by Catullus which you will not find in any published edition of his works. Here, also, is an original manuscript of Sappho — a complete copy of a poem otherwise extant only in brief fragments; here are two of the lost tales of Miletus, a letter of Perides to

Aspasia, an unknown dialogue of Plato and an old Arabian work on astronomy, by some anonymous author, in which the theories of Copernicus are anticipated. And, lastly, here is the somewhat infamous *Histoire d'Amour*, by Bernard de Vaillantcoeur, which was destroyed immediately upon publication, and of which only one other copy is known to exist.'

As I gazed with mingled awe and curiosity on the unique, unheard-of treasures he displayed, I saw in one corner of the drawer what appeared to be a thin volume with plain untitled binding of dark leather. I ventured to pick it up, and found that it contained a few sheets of closely written manuscript in old French.

'And this?' I queried, turning to look at Hilaire, whose face, to my amazement, had suddenly assumed a melancholy and troubled expression.

'It were better not to ask, my son.' He crossed himself as he spoke, and his voice was no longer mellow, but harsh, agitated, full of a sorrowful perturbation. 'There is a curse on the pages that you hold in your hand: an evil spell, a malign power is attached to them, and he who would venture to peruse them is henceforward in dire peril both of body and soul.' He took the little volume from me as he spoke, and returned it to the drawer, again crossing himself carefully as he did so.

'But, father,' I dared to expostulate, 'how can such things be? How can there be danger in a few written sheets of parchment?'

'Christophe, there are things beyond your understanding, things that it were not well for you to know. The might of Satan is manifestable in devious modes, in diverse manners; there are other temptations than those of the world and the flesh, there are evils no less subtle than irresistible, there are hidden heresies, and necromancies other than those which sorcerers practise.'

‘With what, then, are these pages concerned, that such occult peril, such unholy power lurks within them?’

‘I forbid you to ask.’ His tone was one of great rigor, with a finality that dissuaded me from further questioning.

‘For you, my son,’ he went on, ‘the danger would be doubly great, because you are young, ardent, full of desires and curiosities. Believe me, it is better to forget that you have ever seen this manuscript.’ He closed the hidden drawer, and as he did so, the melancholy troubled look was replaced by his former benignity.

‘Now,’ he said, as he turned to one of the book-shelves, ‘I will show you the copy of Ovid that was owned by the poet Petrarch.’ He was again the mellow scholar, the kindly, jovial host, and it was evident that the mysterious manuscript was not to be referred to again. But his odd perturbation, the dark and awful hints he had let fall, the vague terrific terms of his proscription, had all served to awaken my wildest curiosity, and, though I felt the obsession to be unreasonable, I was quite unable to think of anything else for the rest of the evening. All manner of speculations, fantastic, absurd, outrageous, ludicrous, terrible, defiled through my brain as I duly admired the incunabula which Hilaire took down so tenderly from the shelves for my delectation.

At last, toward midnight, he led me to my room — a room especially reserved for visitors, and with more of comfort, of actual luxury in its hangings, carpets and deeply quilted bed than was allowable in the cells of the monks or of the abbot himself. Even when Hilaire had withdrawn, and I had proved for my satisfaction the softness of the bed allotted me, my brain still whirled with questions concerning the forbidden manuscript. Though the storm had now ceased, it was long before I fell asleep; but slumber, when it finally came, was dreamless and profound.

When I awoke, a river of sunshine clear as molten gold was pouring through my window. The storm had wholly vanished, and no lightest tatter of cloud was visible anywhere in the pale-blue October heavens. I ran to the window and peered out on a world of autumnal forest and fields all asparkle with the diamonds of rain. All was beautiful, all was idyllic to a degree that could be fully appreciated only by one who had lived for a long time, as I had, within the walls of a city, with towered buildings in lieu of trees and cobbled pavements where grass should be. But, charming as it was, the foreground held my gaze only for a few moments; then, beyond the tops of the trees, I saw a hill, not more than a mile distant, on whose summit there stood the ruins of some old chateau, the crumbling, brokendown condition of whose walls and towers was plainly visible. It drew my gaze irresistibly, with an overpowering sense of romantic attraction, which somehow seemed so natural, so inevitable, that I did not pause to analyze or wonder; and once having seen it, I could not take my eyes away, but lingering at the window for how long I knew not, scrutinizing as closely as I could the details of each timeshaken turret and bastion. Some undefinable fascination was inherent in the very form, the extent, the disposition of the pile — some fascination not dissimilar to that exerted by a strain of music, by a magical combination of words in poetry, by the features of a beloved face. Gazing, I lost myself in reveries that I could not recall afterward, but which left behind them the same tantalizing sense of innominable delight which forgotten nocturnal dreams may sometimes leave.

I was recalled to the actualities of life by a gentle knock at my door, and realized that I had forgotten to dress myself. It was the abbot, who came to inquire how I had passed the night, and to tell me that breakfast was ready whenever I should care to arise. For some reason, I felt a little embarrassed, even shamefaced, to have been caught day-dreaming; and though this was

doubtless unnecessary, I apologized for my dilatoriness. Hilaire, I thought, gave me a keen, inquiring look, which was quickly withdrawn, as, with the suave courtesy of a good host, he assured me that there was nothing whatever for which I need apologize.

When I had breakfast, I told Hilaire, with many expressions of gratitude for his hospitality, that it was time for me to resume my journey. But his regret at the announcement of my departure was so unfeigned, his invitation to tarry for at least another night was so genuinely hearty, so sincerely urgent, that I consented to remain. In truth, I required no great amount of solicitation, for, apart from the real liking I had taken to Hilaire, the mystery of the forbidden manuscript had entirely enslaved my imagination, and I was loth to leave without having learned more concerning it. Also, for a youth with scholastic leanings, the freedom of the abbot's library was a rare privilege, a precious opportunity not to be passed over.

‘I should like,’ I said, ‘to pursue certain studies while I am here, with the aid of your incomparable collection.’

‘My son, you are more than welcome to remain for any length of time, and you can have access to my books whenever it suits your need or inclination.’ So saying, Hilaire detached the key of the library from his girdle and gave it to me. ‘There are duties,’ he went on, ‘which will call me away from the monastery for a few hours today, and doubtless you will desire to study in my absence.’

A little later, he excused himself and departed. With inward felicitations on the longed-for opportunity that had fallen so readily into my hands, I hastened to the library, with no thought save to read the proscribed manuscript. Giving scarcely a glance at the laden shelves, I sought the table with the secret drawer, and fumbled for the spring. After a little anxious delay, I pressed the proper spot and drew forth the drawer. An impulsion

that had become a veritable obsession, a fever of curiosity that bordered upon actual madness, drove me, and if the safety of my soul had really depended upon it, I could not have denied the desire which forced me to take from the drawer the thin volume with plain unlettered binding.

Seating myself in a chair near one of the windows, I began to peruse the pages, which were only six in number. The writing was peculiar, with letter-forms of a fantasticality I had never met before, and the French was not only old, but well-nigh barbarous in its quaint singularity. Notwithstanding the difficulty I found in deciphering them, a mad, unaccountable thrill ran through me at the first words, and I read on with all the sensations of a man who had been bewitched or who had drunken a philtre of bewildering potency.

There was no title, no date, and the writing was a narrative which began almost as abruptly as it ended. It concerned one Gerard, Comte de Venteillon, who, on the eve of his marriage to the renowned and beautiful demoiselle, Eleanor des Lys, had met in the forest near his chateau a strange, half-human creature with hoofs and horns. Now Gerard, as the narrative explained, was a knightly youth of indisputably proven valor, as well as a true Christian; so, in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, he bade the creature stand and give an account of itself.

Laughing wildly in the twilight, the bizarre being capered before him, and cried:

‘I am a satyr, and your Christ is less to me than the weeds that grow on your kitchen-middens.’

Appalled by such blasphemy, Gerard would have drawn his sword to slay the creature, but again it cried, saying:

‘Stay, Gerard de Venteillon, and I will tell you a secret, knowing which, you will forget the worship of Christ, and forget your beautiful bride of

tomorrow, and turn your back on the world and on the very sun itself with no reluctance and no regret.'

Now, albeit half unwillingly, Gerard lent the satyr an ear and it came closer and whispered to him. And that which it whispered is not known; but before it vanished amid the blackening shadows of the forest, the satyr spoke aloud once more, and said:

'The power of Christ has prevailed like a black frost on all the woods, the fields, the rivers, the mountains, where abode in their felicity the glad, immortal goddesses and nymphs of yore. But still, in the cryptic caverns of earth, in places far underground, like the hell your priests have fabled, there dwells the pagan loveliness, there cry the pagan ecstasies.' And with the last words, the creature laughed again its wild unhuman laugh, and disappeared among the darkening boles of the twilight trees.

From that moment, a change was upon Gerard de Venteillon. He returned to his chateau with downcast mien, speaking no cheery or kindly word to his retainers, as was his wont, but sitting or pacing always in silence, and scarcely heeding the food that was set before him. Nor did he go that evening to visit his betrothed, as he had promised; but, toward midnight, when a waning moon had arisen red as from a bath of blood, he went forth clandestinely by the postern door of the chateau, and followed an old, halfobliterated trail through the woods, found his way to the ruins of the Chateau des Faussesflammes, which stands on a hill opposite the Benedictine abbey of Perigon.

Now these ruins (said the manuscript) are very old, and have long been avoided by the people of the district; for a legendry of immemorial evil clings about them, and it is said that they are the dwelling-place of foul spirits, the rendezvous of sorcerers and succubi. But Gerard, as if oblivious or fearless of their ill renown, plunged like one who is devil-driven into the

shadow of the crumbling walls, and went, with the careful-groping of a man who follows some given direction, to the northern end of the courtyard. There, directly between and below the two centermost windows, which, it may be, looked forth from the chamber of forgotten chatelaines, he pressed with his right foot on a flagstone differing from those about it in being of a triangular form. And the flagstone moved and tilted beneath his foot, revealing a flight of granite steps that went down into the earth. Then, lighting a taper he had brought with him, Gerard descended the steps, and the flagstone swung into place behind him.

On the morrow, his betrothed, Eleanor des Lys, and all her bridal train, waited vainly for him at the cathedral of Vyones, the principal town of Averaigne, where the wedding had been set. And from that time his face was beheld by no man, and no vaguest rumor of Gerard de Venteillon or of the fate that befell him has ever passed among the living...

Such was the substance of the forbidden manuscript, and thus it ended. As I have said before, there was no date, nor was there anything to indicate by whom it had been written or how the knowledge of the happenings related had come into the writer's possession. But, oddly enough, it did not occur to me to doubt their veridity for a moment; and the curiosity I had felt concerning the contents of the manuscript was now replaced by a burning desire, a thousandfold more powerful, more obsessive, to know the ending of the story and to learn what Gerard de Venteillon had found when he descended the hidden steps.

In reading the tale, it had of course occurred to me that the ruins of the Chateau des Faussesflammes, described therein, were the very same ruins I had seen that morning from my chamber window; and pondering this, I became more and more possessed by an insane fever, by a frenetic, unholy excitement. Returning the manuscript to the secret drawer, I left the library

and wandered for awhile in an aimless fashion about the corridors of the monastery. Chancing to meet there the same monk who had taken my horse in charge the previous evening, I ventured to question him, as discreetly and casually as I could, regarding the ruins which were visible from the abbey windows.

He crossed himself, and a frightened look came over his broad, placid face at my query.

‘The ruins are those of the Chateau des Faussesflammes,’ he replied. ‘For untold years, men say, they have been the haunt of unholy spirits, of witches and demons; and festivals not to be described or even named are held within their walls. No weapon known to man, no exorcism or holy water, has ever prevailed against these demons; many brave cavaliers and monks have disappeared amid the shadows of Faussesflammes, never to return; and once, it is told, an abbot of Perigon went thither to make war on the powers of evil; but what befell him at the hands of the succubi is not known or conjectured. Some say that the demons are abominable hags whose bodies terminate in serpentine coils; others that they are women of more than mortal beauty, whose kisses are a diabolic delight that consumes the flesh of men with the fierceness of hell-fire... As for me, I know not whether such tales are true; but I should not care to venture within the walls of Faussesflammes.’

Before he had finished speaking, a resolve had sprung to life full-born in my mind: I felt that I must go to the Chateau des Faussesflammes and learn for myself, if possible, all that could be learned. The impulse was immediate, overwhelming, ineluctable; and even if I had so desired, I could no more have fought against it than if I had been the victim of some sorcerer’s involution. The proscription of the abbot Hilaire, the strange unfinished tale in the old manuscript, the evil legendry at which the monk

had now hinted — all these, it would seem, should have served to frighten and deter me from such a resolve; but, on the contrary, by some bizarre inversion of thought, they seemed to conceal some delectable mystery, to denote a hidden world of ineffable things, of vague undreamable pleasures that set my brain on fire and made my pulses throb deliriously. I did not know, I could not conceive, of what these pleasures would consist; but in some mystical manner I was as sure of their ultimate reality as the abbot Hilaire was sure of heaven.

I determined to go that very afternoon, in the absence of Hilaire, who, I felt instinctively, might be suspicious of any such intention on my part and would surely be inimical toward its fulfilment.

My preparations were very simple: I put in my pockets a small taper from my room and the heel of a loaf of bread from the refectory; and making sure that a little dagger which I always carried was in its sheath, I left the monastery forthwith. Meeting two of the brothers in the courtyard, I told them I was going for a short walk in the neighboring woods. They gave me a jovial ‘*pax vobiscum*’ and went upon their way in the spirit of the words.

Heading directly as I could for Faussesflammes, whose turrets were often lost behind the high and interlacing boughs, I entered the forest. There were no paths, and often I was compelled to brief detours and divagations by the thickness of the underbrush. In my feverous hurry to reach the ruins, it seemed hours before I came to the top of the hill which Faussesflammes surmounted, but probably it was little more than thirty minutes. Climbing the last declivity of the boulder-strewn slope, I came suddenly within view of the chateau, standing close at hand in the center of the level table which formed the summit. Trees had taken root in its broken-down walls, and the ruinous gateway that gave on the courtyard was half-choked by bushes,

brambles and nettle-plants. Forcing my way through, not without difficulty, and with clothing that had suffered from the bramblethorns, I went, like Gerard de Venteillon in the old manuscript, to the northern end of the court. Enormous evil-looking weeds were rooted between the flagstones, rearing their thick and fleshy leaves that had turned to dull sinister maroons and purples with the onset of autumn. But I soon found the triangular flagstone indicated in the tale, and without the slightest delay or hesitation I pressed upon it with my right foot.

A mad shiver, a thrill of adventurous triumph that was mingled with something of trepidation, leaped through me when the great flagstone tilted easily beneath my foot, disclosing dark steps of granite, even as in the story. Now, for a moment, the vaguely hinted horrors of the monkish legends became imminently real in my imagination, and I paused before the black opening that was to engulf me, wondering if some satanic spell had not drawn me thither to perils of unknown terror and inconceivable gravity.

Only for a few instants, however, did I hesitate. Then the sense of peril faded, the monkish horrors became a fantastic dream, and the charm of things unformulable, but ever closer at hand, always more readily attainable, tightened about me like the embrace of amorous arms. I lit my taper, I descended the stair; and even as behind Gerard de Venteillon, the triangular block of stone silently resumed its place in the paving of the court above me. Doubtless it was moved by some mechanism operable by a man's weight on one of the steps; but I did not pause to consider its *modus operandi*, or to wonder if there were any way by which it could be worked from beneath to permit my return.

There were perhaps a dozen steps, terminating in a low, narrow, musty vault that was void of anything more substantial than ancient, dust-encumbered cobwebs. At the end, a small doorway admitted me to a second

vault that differed from the first only in being larger and dustier. I passed through several such vaults, and then found myself in a long passage or tunnel, half blocked in places by boulders or heaps of rubble that had fallen from the crumbling sides. It was very damp, and full of the noisome odor of stagnant waters and subterranean mold. My feet splashed more than once in little pools, and drops fell upon me from above, fetid and foul as if they had oozed from a charnel.

Beyond the wavering circle of light that my taper maintained, it seemed to me that the coils of dim and shadowy serpents slithered away in the darkness at my approach; but I could not be sure whether they really were serpents, or only the troubled and retreating shadows, seen by an eye that was still unaccustomed to the gloom of the vaults.

Rounding a sudden turn in the passage, I saw the last thing I had dreamt of seeing — the gleam of sunlight at what was apparently the tunnel's end. I scarcely know what I had expected to find, but such an eventuation was somehow altogether unanticipated. I hurried on, in some confusion of thought, and stumbled through the opening, to find myself blinking in the full rays of the sun.

Even before I had sufficiently recovered my wits and my eyesight to take note of the landscape before me, I was struck by a strange circumstance: Though it had been early afternoon when I entered the vaults, and though my passage through them could have been a matter of no more than a few minutes, the sun was now nearing the horizon. There was also a difference in its light, which was both brighter and mellower than the sun I had seen above Averroigne; and the sky itself was intensely blue, with no hint of autumnal pallor.

Now, with ever-increasing stupefaction, I stared about me, and could find nothing familiar or even credible in the scene upon which I had emerged.

Contrary to all reasonable expectation, there was no semblance of the hill upon which Faussesflammes stood, or of the adjoining country; but around me was a placid land of rolling meadows, through which a golden-gleaming river meandered toward a sea of deepest azure that was visible beyond the tops of laureltrees... But there are no laurel-trees in Averoigne, and the sea is hundreds of miles away: judge, then, my complete confusion and dumbfoundment.

It was a scene of such loveliness as I have never before beheld. The meadow-grass at my feet was softer and more lustrous than emerald velvet, and was full of violets and many-colored asphodels. The dark green of ilex-trees was mirrored in the golden river, and far away I saw the pale gleam of a marble acropolis on a low summit above the plain. All things bore the aspect of a mild and clement spring that was verging upon an opulent summer. I felt as if I had stepped into a land of classic myth, of Grecian legend; and moment by moment, all surprise, all wonder as to how I could have come there, was drowned in a sense of ever-growing ecstasy before the utter, ineffable beauty of the landscape.

Near by, in a laurel-grove, a white roof shone in the late rays of the sun. I was drawn toward it by the same allurements, only far more potent and urgent, which I had felt on seeing the forbidden manuscript and the ruins of Faussesflammes. Here, I knew with an esoteric certainty, was the culmination of my quest, the reward of all my mad and perhaps impious curiosity.

As I entered the grove, I heard laughter among the trees, blending harmoniously with the low murmur of their leaves in a soft, balmy wind. I thought I saw vague forms that melted among the boles at my approach; and once a shaggy, goat-like creature with human head and body ran across my path, as if in pursuit of a flying nymph.

In the heart of the grove, I found a marble place with a portico of Doric columns. As I neared it, I was greeted by two women in the costume of ancient slaves; and though my Greek is of the meagerest, I found no difficulty in comprehending their speech, which was of Attic purity.

‘Our mistress, Nycea, awaits you,’ they told me. I could no longer marvel at anything, but accepted my situation without question or surmise, like one who resigns himself to the progress of some delightful dream. Probably, I thought, it was a dream, and I was still lying in my bed at the monastery; but never before had I been favored by nocturnal visions of such clarity and surpassing loveliness. The interior of the palace was full of a luxury that verged upon the barbaric, and which evidently belonged to the period of Greek decadence, with its intermingling of Oriental influences. I was led through a hallway gleaming with onyx and polished porphyry, into an opulently furnished room, where, on a couch of gorgeous fabrics, there reclined a woman of goddess-like beauty.

At sight of her, I trembled from head to foot with the violence of a strange emotion. I had heard of the sudden mad loves by which men are seized on beholding for the first time a certain face and form; but never before had I experienced a passion of such intensity, such all-consuming ardor, as the one I conceived immediately for this woman. Indeed, it seemed as if I had loved her for a long time, without knowing that it was she whom I loved, and without being able to identify the nature of my emotion or to orient the feeling in any manner.

She was not tall, but was formed with exquisite voluptuous purity of line and contour. Her eyes were of a dark sapphire blue, with molten depths into which the soul was fain to plunge as into the soft abysses of a summer ocean. The curve of her lips was enigmatic, a little mournful, and gravely tender as the lips of an antique Venus. Her hair, brownish rather than blond,

fell over her neck and ears and forehead in delicious ripples confined by a plain fillet of silver. In her expression, there was a mixture of pride and voluptuousness, of regal imperiousness and feminine yielding. Her movements were all as effortless and graceful as those of a serpent.

‘I knew you would come,’ she murmured in the same softvoweled Greek I had heard from the lips of her servants. ‘I have waited for you long; but when you sought refuge from the storm in the abbey of Perigon, and saw the manuscript in the secret drawer, I knew that the hour of your arrival was at hand. Ah! you did not dream that the spell which drew you so irresistibly, with such unaccountable potency, was the spell of my beauty, the magical allurements of my love!’

‘Who are you?’ I queried. I spoke readily in Greek, which would have surprised me greatly an hour before. But now, I was prepared to accept anything whatever, no matter how fantastic or preposterous, as part of the miraculous fortune, the unbelievable adventure which had befallen me.

‘I am Nycea,’ she replied to my question. ‘I love you, and the hospitality of my palace and of my arms is at your disposal. Need you know anything more?’

The slaves had disappeared. I flung myself beside the couch and kissed the hand she offered me, pouring out protestations that were no doubt incoherent, but were nevertheless full of an ardor that made her smile tenderly. Her hand was cool to my lips, but the touch of it fired my passion. I ventured to seat myself beside her on the couch, and she did not deny my familiarity. While a soft purple twilight began to fill the corners of the chamber, we conversed happily, saying over and over again all the sweet absurd litanies, all the felicitous nothings that come instinctively to the lips of lovers. She was incredibly soft in my arms, and it seemed almost as if the

completeness of her yielding was unhindered by the presence of bones in her lovely body.

The servants entered noiselessly, lighting rich lamps of intricately carven gold, and setting before us a meal of spicy meats, of unknown savorous fruits and potent wines. But I could eat little, and while I drank, I thirsted for the sweeter wine of Nycea's mouth.

I do not know when we fell asleep; but the evening had flown like an enchanted moment. Heavy with felicity, I drifted off on a silken tide of drowsiness, and the golden lamps and the face of Nycea blurred in a blissful mist and were seen no more.

Suddenly, from the depths of a slumber beyond all dreams, I found myself compelled into full wakefulness. For an instant, I did not even realize where I was, still less what had aroused me. Then I heard a footfall in the open doorway of the room, and peering across the sleeping head of Nycea, saw in the lamplight the abbot Hilaire, who had paused on the threshold. A look of absolute horror was imprinted upon his face, and as he caught sight of me, he began to gibber in Latin, in tones where something of fear was blended with fanatical abhorrence and hatred. I saw that he carried in his hands a large bottle and an aspergillus. I felt sure that the bottle was full of holy water, and of course divined the use for which it was intended.

Looking at Nycea, I saw that she too was awake, and knew that she was aware of the abbot's presence. She gave me a strange smile, in which I read an affectionate pity, mingled with the reassurance that a woman offers a frightened child.

'Do not fear for me,' she whispered.

'Foul vampire! accursed lamia! she-serpent of hell!' thundered the abbot suddenly, as he crossed the threshold of the room, raising the aspergillus aloft. At the same moment, Nycea glided from the couch, with an

unbelievable swiftness of motion, and vanished through an outer door that gave upon the forest of laurels. Her voice hovered in my ear, seeming to come from an immense distance:

‘Farewell for awhile, Christophe. But have no fear. You shall find me again if you are brave and patient.’

As the words ended, the holy water from the aspergillus fell on the floor of the chamber and on the couch where Nycea had lain beside me. There was a crash as of many thunders, and the golden lamps went out in a darkness that seemed full of falling dust, of raining fragments. I lost all consciousness, and when I recovered, I found myself lying on a heap of rubble in one of the vaults I had traversed earlier in the day. With a taper in his hand, and an expression of great solicitude, of infinite pity upon his face, Hilaire was stooping over me. Beside him lay the bottle and the dripping aspergillus.

‘I thank God, my son, that I found you in good time,’ he said. ‘When I returned to the abbey this evening and learned that you were gone, I surmised all that had happened. I knew you had read the accursed manuscript in my absence, and had fallen under its baleful spell, as have so many others, even to a certain reverend abbot, one of my predecessors. All of them, alas! beginning hundreds of years ago with Gerard de Venteillon, have fallen victims to the lamia who dwells in these vaults.’

‘The lamia?’ I questioned, hardly comprehending his words.

‘Yes, my son, the beautiful Nycea who lay in your arms this night is a lamia, an ancient vampire, who maintains in these noisome vaults her palace of beatific illusions. How she came to take up her abode at Faussesflammes is not known, for her coming antedates the memory of men. She is old as paganism; the Greeks knew her; she was exorcised by Apollonius of Tyana; and if you could behold her as she really is, you

would see, in lieu of her voluptuous body, the folds of a foul and monstrous serpent. All those whom she loves and admits to her hospitality, she devours in the end, after she has drained them of life and vigor with the diabolic delight of her kisses. The laurel-wooded plain you saw, the ilex-bordered river, the marble palace and all the luxury therein, were no more than a satanic delusion, a lovely bubble that rose from the dust and mold of immemorial death, of ancient corruption. They crumbled at the kiss of the holy water I brought with me when I followed you. But Nycea, alas! has escaped, and I fear she will still survive, to build again her palace of demoniacal enchantments, to commit again and again the unspeakable abomination of her sins.'

Still in a sort of stupor at the ruin of my new-found happiness, at the singular revelations made by the abbot, I followed him obediently as he led the way through the vaults of Faussesflammes. He mounted the stairway by which I had descended, and as he neared the top and was forced to stoop a little, the great flagstone swung upward, letting in a stream of chill moonlight. We emerged; and I permitted him to take me back to the monastery.

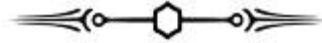
As my brain began to clear, and the confusion into which I had been thrown resolved itself, a feeling of resentment grew apace — a keen anger at the interference of Hilaire. Unheeding whether or not he had rescued me from dire physical and spiritual perils, I lamented the beautiful dream of which he had deprived me. The kisses of Nycea burned softly in my memory, and I knew that whatever she was, woman or demon or serpent, there was no one in all the world who could ever arouse in me the same love and the same delight. I took care, however, to conceal my feelings from Hilaire, realizing that a betrayal of such emotions would merely lead him to look upon me as a soul that was lost beyond redemption.

On the morrow, pleading the urgency of my return home, I departed from Perigon. Now, in the library of my father's house near Moulins, I write this account of my adventures. The memory of Nycea is magically clear, ineffably dear as if she were still beside me, and still I see the rich draperies of a midnight chamber illumined by lamps of curiously carven gold, and still I hear the words of her farewell:

‘Have no fear. You shall find me again if you are brave and patient.’

Soon I shall return, to visit again the ruins of the Chateau des Faussesflammes, and redescend into the vaults below the triangular flagstone. But, in spite of the nearness of Perigon to Faussesflammes, in spite of my esteem for the abbot, my gratitude for his hospitality and my admiration for his incomparable library, I shall not care to revisit my friend Hilaire.

A Rendezvous in Averoine



GERARD DE L'AUTOMNE WAS meditating the rimes of a new ballade in honor of Fleurette, as he followed the leaf-arressed pathway toward Vyones through the woodland of Averoine. Since he was on his way to meet Fleurette, who had promised to keep a rendezvous among the oaks and beeches like any peasant girl, Gerard himself made better progress than the ballade. His love was at that stage which, even for a professional troubadour, is more productive of distraction than inspiration; and he was recurrently absorbed in a meditation upon other than merely verbal felicities.

The grass and trees had assumed the fresh enamel of a mediæval May; the turf was figured with little blossoms of azure and white and yellow, like an ornate broidery; and there was a pebbly stream that murmured beside the way, as if the voices of undines were parleying deliciously beneath its waters. The sun-lulled air was laden with a wafture of youth and romance; and the longing that welled from the heart of Gerard seemed to mingle mystically with the balsams of the wood.

Gerard was a trouvère whose scant years and many wanderings had brought him a certain renown. After the fashion of his kind he had roamed from court to court, from château to château; and he was now the guest of the Comte de la Frênaie, whose high castle held dominion over half the surrounding forest. Visiting one day that quaint cathedral town, Vyones, which lies so near to the ancient wood of Averoine, Gerard had seen Fleurette, the daughter of a well-to-do mercer named Guillaume Cochin;

and had become more sincerely enamored of her blond piquancy than was to be expected from one who had been so frequently susceptible in such matters. He had managed to make his feelings known to her; and, after a month of billets-doux, ballads and stolen interviews contrived by the help of a complaisant waiting-woman, she had made this woodland tryst with him in the absence of her father from Vyones. Accompanied by her maid and a man-servant, she was to leave the town early that afternoon and meet Gerard under a certain beech-tree of enormous age and size. The servants would then withdraw discreetly; and the lovers, to all intents and purposes, would be alone. It was not likely that they would be seen or interrupted; for the gnarled and immemorial wood possessed an ill-repute among the peasantry. Somewhere in this wood there was the ruinous and haunted Château des Faussesflammes; and, also, there was a double tomb, within which the Sieur Hugh du Malinbois and his chatelaine, who were notorious for sorcery in their time, had lain unconsecrated for more than two hundred years. Of these, and their phantoms, there were grisly tales; and there were stories of loup-garous and goblins, of fays and devils and vampires that infested Averoine. But to these tales Gerard had given little heed, considering it improbable that such creatures would fare abroad in open daylight. The madcap Fleurette had professed herself unafraid also; but it had been necessary to promise the servants a substantial pourboire, since they shared fully the local superstitions.

“He plunged without hesitation among the low-hanging boughs from which the voice had seemed to emerge.”

Gerard had wholly forgotten the legendry of Averoine, as he hastened along the sun-flecked path. He was nearing the appointed beech-tree, which a turn of the path would soon reveal; and his pulses quickened and became tremulous, as he wondered if Fleurette had already reached the trysting-

place. He abandoned all effort to continue his ballade, which, in the three miles he had walked from La Frênaie, had not progressed beyond the middle of a tentative first stanza.

His thoughts were such as would befit an ardent and impatient lover. They were now interrupted by a shrill scream that rose to an unendurable pitch of fear and horror, issuing from the green stillness of the pines beside the way. Startled, he peered at the thick branches; and as the scream fell back to silence, he heard the sound of dull and hurrying footfalls, and a scuffling as of several bodies. Again the scream arose. It was plainly the voice of a woman in some distressful peril. Loosening his dagger in its sheath, and clutching more firmly a long hornbeam staff which he had brought with him as a protection against the vipers which were said to lurk in Averoine, he plunged without hesitation or premeditation among the low-hanging boughs from which the voice had seemed to emerge.

In a small open space beyond the trees, he saw a woman who was struggling with three ruffians of exceptionally brutal and evil aspect. Even in the haste and vehemence of the moment, Gerard realized that he had never before seen such men or such a woman. The woman was clad in a gown of emerald green that matched her eyes; in her face was the pallor of dead things, together with a faery beauty; and her lips were dyed as with the scarlet of newly flowing blood. The men were dark as Moors, and their eyes were red slits of flame beneath oblique brows with animal-like bristles. There was something very peculiar in the shape of their feet; but Gerard did not realize the exact nature of the peculiarity till long afterward. Then he remembered that all of them were seemingly club-footed, though they were able to move with surpassing agility. Somehow, he could never recall what sort of clothing they had worn.

The woman turned a beseeching gaze upon Gerard as he sprang forth from amid the boughs. The men, however, did not seem to heed his coming; though one of them caught in a hairy clutch the hands which the woman sought to reach toward her rescuer.

Lifting his staff, Gerard rushed upon the ruffians. He struck a tremendous blow at the head of the nearest one — a blow that should have leveled the fellow to earth. But the staff came down on unresisting air, and Gerard staggered and almost fell headlong in trying to recover his equilibrium. Dazed and uncomprehending, he saw that the knot of struggling figures had vanished utterly. At least, the three men had vanished; but from the middle branches of a tall pine beyond the open space, the death-white features of the woman smiled upon him for a moment with faint, inscrutable guile ere they melted among the needles.

Gerard understood now; and he shivered as he crossed himself. He had been deluded by phantoms or demons, doubtless for no good purpose; he had been the gull of a questionable enchantment. Plainly there was something after all in the legends he had heard, in the ill-renown of the forest of Averroigne.

He retraced his way toward the path he had been following. But when he thought to reach again the spot from which he had heard that shrill unearthly scream, he saw that there was no longer a path; nor, indeed, any feature of the forest which he could remember or recognize. The foliage about him no longer displayed a brilliant verdure; it was sad and funereal, and the trees themselves were either cypress-like, or were already sere with autumn or decay. In lieu of the purling brook there lay before him a tarn of waters that were dark and dull as clotting blood, and which gave back no reflection of the brown autumnal sedges that trailed therein like the hair of suicides, and the skeletons of rotting osiers that writhed above them.

Now, beyond all question, Gerard knew that he was the victim of an evil enchantment. In answering that beguileful cry for succor, he had exposed himself to the spell, had been lured within the circle of its power. He could not know what forces of wizardry or demonry had willed to draw him thus; but he knew that his situation was fraught with supernatural menace. He gripped the hornbeam staff more tightly in his hand, and prayed to all the saints he could remember, as he peered about for some tangible bodily presence of ill.

The scene was utterly desolate and lifeless, like a place where cadavers might keep their tryst with demons. Nothing stirred, not even a dead leaf; and there was no whisper of dry grass or foliage, no song of birds nor murmuring of bees, no sigh nor chuckle of water. The corpse-gray heavens above seemed never to have held a sun; and the chill, unchanging light was without source or destination, without beams or shadows.

Gerard surveyed his environment with a cautious eye; and the more he looked the less he liked it: for some new and disagreeable detail was manifest at every glance. There were moving lights in the wood that vanished if he eyed them intently; there were drowned faces in the tarn that came and went like livid bubbles before he could discern their features. And, peering across the lake, he wondered why he had not seen the many-turreted castle of hoary stone whose nearer walls were based in the dead waters. It was so gray and still and vasty, that it seemed to have stood for incomputable ages between the stagnant tarn and the equally stagnant heavens. It was ancients than the world, it was older than the light: it was coeval with fear and darkness; and a horror dwelt upon it and crept unseen but palpable along its bastions.

There was no sign of life about the castle; and no banners flew above its turrets or its donjon. But Gerard knew, as surely as if a voice had spoken

aloud to warn him, that here was the fountainhead of the sorcery by which he had been beguiled. A growing panic whispered in his brain, he seemed to hear the rustle of malignant plumes, the mutter of demonian threats and plottings. He turned, and fled among the funereal trees.

Amid his dismay and wilderment, even as he fled, he thought of Fleurette and wondered if she were awaiting him at their place of rendezvous, or if she and her companions had also been enticed and led astray in a realm of damnable unrealities. He renewed his prayers, and implored the saints for her safety as well as his own.

The forest through which he ran was a maze of bafflement and eeriness. There were no landmarks, there were no tracks of animals or men; and the swart cypresses and sere autumnal trees grew thicker and thicker as if some malevolent will were marshalling them against his progress. The boughs were like implacable arms that strove to retard him; he could have sworn that he felt them twine about him with the strength and suppleness of living things. He fought them, insanely, desperately, and seemed to hear a crackling of infernal laughter in their twigs as he fought. At last, with a sob of relief, he broke through into a sort of trail. Along this trail, in the mad hope of eventual escape, he ran like one whom a fiend pursues; and after a short interval he came again to the shores of the tarn, above whose motionless waters the high and hoary turrets of that time-forgotten castle were still dominant. Again he turned and fled; and once more, after similar wanderings and like struggles, he came back to the inevitable tarn.

With a leaden sinking of his heart, as into some ultimate slough of despair and terror, he resigned himself and made no further effort to escape. His very will was benumbed, was crushed down as by the incumbence of a superior volition that would no longer permit his puny recalcitrance. He was

unable to resist when a strong and hateful compulsion drew his footsteps along the margin of the tarn toward the looming castle.

When he came nearer, he saw that the edifice was surrounded by a moat whose waters were stagnant as those of the lake, and were mantled with the iridescent scum of corruption. The drawbridge was down and the gates were open, as if to receive an expected guest. But still there was no sign of human occupancy; and the walls of the great gray building were silent as those of a sepulcher. And more tomb-like even than the rest was the square and overtowering bulk of the mighty donjon.

Impelled by the same power that had drawn him along the lake-shore, Gerard crossed the drawbridge and passed beneath the frowning barbican into a vacant courtyard. Barred windows looked blankly down; and at the opposite end of the court a door stood mysteriously open, revealing a dark hall. As he approached the doorway, he saw that a man was standing on the threshold; though a moment previous he could have sworn that it was untenanted by any visible form.

Gerard had retained his hornbeam staff; and though his reason told him that such a weapon was futile against any supernatural foe, some obscure instinct prompted him to clasp it valiantly as he neared the waiting figure on the sill.

The man was inordinately tall and cadaverous, and was dressed in black garments of a superannuate mode. His lips were strangely red, amid his bluish beard and the mortuary whiteness of his face. They were like the lips of the woman who, with her assailants, had disappeared in a manner so dubious when Gerard had approached them. His eyes were pale and luminous as marsh-lights; and Gerard shuddered at his gaze and at the cold, ironic smile of his scarlet lips, that seemed to reserve a world of secrets all too dreadful and hideous to be disclosed.

“I am the Sieur du Malinbois,” the man announced. His tones were both unctuous and hollow, and served to increase the repugnance felt by the young troubadour. And when his lips parted, Gerard had a glimpse of teeth that were unnaturally small and were pointed like the fangs of some fierce animal.

“Fortune has willed that you should become my guest,” the man went on. “The hospitality which I can proffer you is rough and inadequate, and it may be that you will find my abode a trifle dismal. But at least I can assure you of a welcome no less ready than sincere.”

“I thank you for your kind offer,” said Gerard. “But I have an appointment with a friend; and I seem in some unaccountable manner to have lost my way. I should be profoundly grateful if you would direct me toward Vyones. There should be a path not far from here; and I have been so stupid as to stray from it.”

The words rang empty and hopeless in his own ears even as he uttered them; and the name that his strange host had given — the Sieur du Malinbois — was haunting his mind like the funereal accents of a knell; though he could not recall at that moment the macabre and spectral ideas which the name tended to evoke.

“Unfortunately, there are no paths from my château to Vyones,” the stranger replied. “As for your rendezvous, it will be kept in another manner, at another place, than the one appointed. I must therefore insist that you accept my hospitality. Enter, I pray; but leave your hornbeam staff at the door. You will have no need of it any longer.”

Gerard thought that he made a move of distaste and aversion with his over-red lips as he spoke the last sentences; and that his eyes lingered on the staff with an obscure apprehensiveness. And the strange emphasis of his words and demeanor served to awaken other fantasmal and macabre

thoughts in Gerard's brain; though he could not formulate them fully till afterward. And somehow he was prompted to retain the weapon, no matter how useless it might be against an enemy of spectral or diabolic nature. So he said:

"I must crave your indulgence if I retain the staff. I have made a vow to carry it with me, in my right hand or never beyond arm's reach, till I have slain two vipers."

"That is a queer vow," rejoined his host. "However, bring it with you if you like. It is of no matter to me if you choose to encumber yourself with a wooden stick."

He turned abruptly, motioning Gerard to follow him. The troubadour obeyed unwillingly, with one rearward glance at the vacant heavens and the empty courtyard. He saw with no great surprize that a sudden and furtive darkness had closed in upon the château without moon or star, as if it had been merely waiting for him to enter before it descended. It was thick as the folds of a serecloth, it was airless and stifling like the gloom of a sepulcher that has been sealed for ages; and Gerard was aware of a veritable oppression, a corporeal and psychic difficulty in breathing, as he crossed the threshold.

He saw that cressets were now burning in the dim hall to which his host had admitted him; though he had not perceived the time and agency of their lighting. The illumination they afforded was singularly vague and indistinct, and the thronging shadows of the hall were unexplainably numerous, and moved with a mysterious disquiet; though the flames themselves were still as tapers that burn for the dead in a windless vault.

At the end of the passage, the Sieur du Malinbois flung open a heavy door of dark and somber wood. Beyond, in what was plainly the eating-room of the château, several people were seated about a long table by the

light of cressets no less dreary and dismal than those in the hall. In the strange, uncertain glow, their faces were touched with a gloomy dubiety, with a lurid distortion; and it seemed to Gerard that shadows hardly distinguishable from the figures were gathered around the board. But nevertheless he recognized the assembled company at a glance, with an overpowering shock of astonishment.

At one end of the board, there sat the woman in emerald green who had vanished in so doubtful a fashion amid the pines when Gerard answered her call for succor. At one side, looking very pale and forlorn and frightened, was Fleurette Cochin. At the lower end reserved for retainers and inferiors, there sat the maid and the man-servant who had accompanied Fleurette to her rendezvous with Gerard.

The Sieur du Malinbois turned to the troubadour with a smile of sardonic amusement.

“I believe you have already met every one assembled,” he observed. “But you have not yet been formally presented to my wife, Agathe, who is presiding over the board. Agathe, I bring to you Gerard de l’Automne, a young troubadour of much note and merit.”

The woman nodded slightly, without speaking, and pointed to a chair opposite Fleurette. Gerard seated himself, and the Sieur du Malinbois assumed according to feudal custom a place at the head of the table beside his wife.

Now, for the first time, Gerard noticed that there were servitors who came and went in the room, setting upon the table various wines and viands. The servitors were preternaturally swift and noiseless, and somehow it was very difficult to be sure of their precise features or their costumes. They seemed to walk in an adumbration of sinister insoluble twilight. But the troubadour was disturbed by a feeling that they resembled the swart

demoniac ruffians who had disappeared together with the woman in green when he approached them.

The meal that ensued was a weird and funereal affair. A sense of insuperable constraint, of smothering horror and hideous oppression, was upon Gerard; and though he wanted to ask Fleurette a hundred questions, and also demand an explanation of sundry matters from his host and hostess, he was totally unable to frame the words or to utter them. He could only look at Fleurette, and read in her eyes a duplication of his own helpless bewilderment and nightmare thralldom. Nothing was said by the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady, who were exchanging glances of a secret and baleful intelligence all through the meal; and Fleurette's maid and manservant were obviously paralyzed by terror, like birds beneath the hypnotic gaze of deadly serpents.

The foods were rich and of strange savor; and the wines were fabulously old, and seemed to retain in their topaz or violet depths the unextinguished fire of buried centuries. But Gerard and Fleurette could barely touch them; and they saw that the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady did not eat or drink at all. The gloom of the chamber deepened; the servitors became more furtive and spectral in their movements; the stifling air was laden with unformulable menace, was constrained by the spell of a black and lethal necromancy. Above the aromas of the rare foods, the bouquets of the antique wines, there crept forth the choking mustiness of hidden vaults and embalmed centurial corruption, together with the ghostly spice of a strange perfume that seemed to emanate from the person of the chatelaine. And now Gerard was remembering many tales from the legendry of Averoine, which he had heard and disregarded; was recalling the story of a Sieur du Malinbois and his lady, the last of the name and the most evil, who had been buried somewhere in this forest hundreds of years ago; and whose

tomb was shunned by the peasantry since they were said to continue their sorceries even in death. He wondered what influence had bedrugged his memory, that he had not recalled it wholly when he had first heard the name. And he was remembering other things and other stories, all of which confirmed his instinctive belief regarding the nature of the people into whose hands he had fallen. Also, he recalled a folklore superstition concerning the use to which a wooden stake can be put; and realized why the Sieur du Malinbois had shown a peculiar interest in the hornbeam staff. Gerard had laid the staff beside his chair when he sat down; and he was reassured to find that it had not vanished. Very quietly and unobtrusively, he placed his foot upon it.

The uncanny meal came to an end; and the host and his chatelaine arose.

“I shall now conduct you to your rooms,” said the Sieur du Malinbois, including all of his guests in a dark, inscrutable glance. “Each of you can have a separate chamber, if you so desire; or Fleurette Cochin and her maid Angelique can remain together; and the man-servant Raoul can sleep in the same room with Messire Gerard.”

A preference for the latter procedure was voiced by Fleurette and the troubadour. The thought of uncompanied solitude in that castle of timeless midnight and nameless mystery was abhorrent to an insupportable degree.

The four were now led to their respective chambers, on opposite sides of a hall whose length was but indeterminately revealed by the dismal lights. Fleurette and Gerard bade each other a dismayed and reluctant good-night beneath the constraining eye of their host. Their rendezvous was hardly the one which they had thought to keep; and both were overwhelmed by the supernatural situation amid whose dubious horrors and ineluctable sorceries they had somehow become involved. And no sooner had Gerard left

Fleurette than he began to curse himself for a poltroon because he had not refused to part from her side; and he marvelled at the spell of drug-like involution that had bedrowsed all his faculties. It seemed that his will was not his own, but had been thrust down and throttled by an alien power.

The room assigned to Gerard and Raoul was furnished with a couch, and a great bed whose curtains were of antique fashion and fabric. It was lighted with tapers that had a funereal suggestion in their form, and which burned dully in an air that was stagnant with the mustiness of dead years.

“May you sleep soundly,” said the *Sieur du Malinbois*. The smile that accompanied and followed the words was no less unpleasant than the oily and sepulchral tone in which they were uttered. The troubadour and the servant were conscious of profound relief when he went out and closed the leaden-clanging door. And their relief was hardly diminished even when they heard the click of a key in the lock.

Gerard was now inspecting the room; and he went to the one window, through whose small and deep-set panes he could see only the pressing darkness of a night that was veritably solid, as if the whole place were buried beneath the earth and were closed in by clinging mold. Then, with an access of unsmothered rage at his separation from Fleurette, he ran to the door and hurled himself against it, he beat upon it with his clenched fists, but in vain. Realizing his folly, and desisting at last, he turned to Raoul.

“Well, Raoul,” he said, “what do you think of all this?”

Raoul crossed himself before he answered; and his face had assumed the vizard of a mortal fear.

“I think, *Messire*,” he finally replied, “that we have all been decoyed by a malefic sorcery; and that you, myself, the *demoiselle Fleurette*, and the maid *Angelique*, are all in deadly peril of both soul and body.”

“That, also, is my thought,” said Gerard. “And I believe it would be well that you and I should sleep only by turns; and that he who keeps vigil should retain in his hands my hornbeam staff, whose end I shall now sharpen with my dagger. I am sure that you know the manner in which it should be employed if there are any intruders; for if such should come, there would be no doubt as to their character and their intentions. We are in a castle which has no legitimate existence, as the guests of people who have been dead, or supposedly dead, for more than two hundred years. And such people, when they stir abroad, are prone to habits which I need not specify.”

“Yes, Messire.” Raoul shuddered; but he watched the sharpening of the staff with considerable interest. Gerard whittled the hard wood to a lance-like point, and hid the shavings carefully. He even carved the outline of a little cross near the middle of the staff, thinking that this might increase its efficacy or save it from molestation. Then, with the staff in his hand, he sat down upon the bed, where he could survey the litten room from between the curtains.

“You can sleep first, Raoul.” He indicated the couch, which was near the door.

The two conversed in a fitful manner for some minutes. After hearing Raoul’s tale of how Fleurette, Angelique and himself had been led astray by the sobbing of a woman amid the pines, and had been unable to retrace their way, the troubadour changed the theme. And henceforth he spoke idly and of matters remote from his real preoccupations, to fight down his torturing concern for the safety of Fleurette. Suddenly he became aware that Raoul had ceased to reply; and saw that the servant had fallen asleep on the couch. At the same time an irresistible drowsiness surged upon Gerard himself in spite of all his volition, in spite of the eldritch terrors and forebodings that still murmured in his brain. He heard through his growing hebetude a

whisper as of shadowy wings in the castle halls; he caught the sibilation of ominous voices, like those of familiars that respond to the summoning of wizards; and he seemed to hear, even in the vaults and towers and remote chambers, the tread of feet that were hurrying on malign and secret errands. But oblivion was around him like the meshes of a sable net; and it closed in relentlessly upon his troubled mind, and drowned the alarms of his agitated senses.

When Gerard awoke at length, the tapers had burned to their sockets; and a sad and sunless daylight was filtering through the window. The staff was still in his hand; and though his senses were still dull with the strange slumber that had drugged them, he felt that he was unharmed. But peering between the curtains, he saw that Raoul was lying mortally pale and lifeless on the couch, with the air and look of an exhausted moribund.

He crossed the room, and stooped above the servant. There was a small red wound on Raoul's neck; and his pulses were slow and feeble, like those of one who has lost a great amount of blood. His very appearance was withered and vein-drawn. And a phantom spice arose from the couch — a lingering wraith of the perfume worn by the chatelaine Agathe.

Gerard succeeded at last in arousing the man; but Raoul was very weak and drowsy. He could remember nothing of what had happened during the night; and his horror was pitiful to behold when he realized the truth.

“It will be your turn next, Messire,” he cried. “These vampires mean to hold us here amid their unhallowed necromancies till they have drained us of our last drop of blood. Their spells are like mandragora or the sleepy sirups of Cathay; and no man can keep awake in their despite.”

Gerard was trying the door; and somewhat to his surprize he found it unlocked. The departing vampire had been careless, in the lethargy of her repletion. The castle was very still; and it seemed to Gerard that the

animating spirit of evil was now quiescent; that the shadowy wings of horror and malignity, the feet that had sped on baleful errands, the summoning sorcerers, the responding familiars, were all lulled in a temporary slumber.

He opened the door, he tiptoed along the deserted hall, and knocked at the portal of the chamber allotted to Fleurette and her maid. Fleurette, fully dressed, answered his knock immediately; and he caught her in his arms without a word, searching her wan face with a tender anxiety. Over her shoulder he could see the maid Angelique, who was sitting listlessly on the bed with a mark on her white neck similar to the wound that had been suffered by Raoul. He knew, even before Fleurette began to speak, that the nocturnal experiences of the demoiselle and her maid had been identical with those of himself and the man-servant.

While he tried to comfort Fleurette and reassure her, his thoughts were now busy with a rather curious problem. No one was abroad in the castle; and it was more than probable that the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady were both asleep after the nocturnal feast which they had undoubtedly enjoyed. Gerard pictured to himself the place and the fashion of their slumber; and he grew even more reflective as certain possibilities occurred to him.

“Be of good cheer, sweetheart,” he said to Fleurette. “It is in my mind that we may soon escape from this abominable mesh of enchantments. But I must leave you for a little and speak again with Raoul, whose help I shall require in a certain matter.”

He went back to his own chamber. The man-servant was sitting on the couch and was crossing himself feebly and muttering prayers with a faint, hollow voice.

“Raoul,” said the troubadour a little sternly, “you must gather all your strength and come with me. Amid the gloomy walls that surround us, the

somber ancient halls, the high towers and the heavy bastions, there is but one thing that veritably exists; and all the rest is a fabric of illusion. We must find the reality whereof I speak, and deal with it like true and valiant Christians. Come, we will now search the castle ere the lord and chatelaine shall awaken from their vampire lethargy.”

He led the way along the devious corridors with a swiftness that betokened much forethought. He had reconstructed in his mind the hoary pile of battlements and turrets as he had seen them on the previous day; and he felt that the great donjon, being the center and stronghold of the edifice, might well be the place which he sought. With the sharpened staff in his hand, with Raoul lagging bloodlessly at his heels, he passed the doors of many secret rooms, the many windows that gave on the blindness of an inner court, and came at last to the lower story of the donjon-keep.

It was a large, bare room, entirely built of stone, and illumined only by narrow slits high up in the wall, that had been designed for the use of archers. The place was very dim; but Gerard could see the glimmering outlines of an object not ordinarily to be looked for in such a situation, that arose from the middle of the floor. It was a tomb of marble; and stepping nearer, he saw that it was strangely weather-worn and was blotched by lichens of gray and yellow, such as flourish only within access of the sun. The slab that covered it was doubly broad and massive, and would require the full strength of two men to lift.

Raoul was staring stupidly at the tomb. “What now, Messire?” he queried.

“You and I, Raoul, are about to intrude upon the bedchamber of our host and hostess.”

At his direction, Raoul seized one end of the slab; and he himself took the other. With a mighty effort that strained their bones and sinews to the

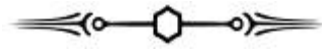
cracking-point, they sought to remove it; but the slab hardly stirred. At length, by grasping the same end in unison, they were able to tilt the slab; and it slid away and dropped to the floor with a thunderous crash. Within, there were two open coffins, one of which contained the Sieur Hugh du Malinbois and the other his lady Agathe. Both of them appeared to be slumbering peacefully as infants; a look of tranquil evil, of pacified malignity, was imprinted upon their features; and their lips were dyed with a fresher scarlet than before.

Without hesitation or delay, Gerard plunged the lance-like end of his staff into the bosom of the Sieur du Malinbois. The body crumbled as if it were wrought of ashes kneaded and painted to a human semblance; and a slight odor as of age-old corruption arose to the nostrils of Gerard. Then the troubadour pierced in like manner the bosom of the chatelaine. And simultaneously with her dissolution, the walls and floor of the donjon seemed to dissolve like a sullen vapor, they rolled away on every side with a shock as of unheard thunder. With a sense of indescribable vertigo and confusion Gerard and Raoul saw that the whole château had vanished like the towers and battlements of a bygone storm; that the dead lake and its rotting shores no longer offered their malefical illusions to the eye. They were standing in a forest-glade, in the full unshadowed light of the afternoon sun; and all that remained of the dismal castle was the lichen-mantled tomb that stood open beside them. Fleurette and her maid were a little distance away; and Gerard ran to the mercer's daughter and took her in his arms. She was dazed with wonderment, like one who emerges from the night-long labyrinth of an evil dream, and finds that all is well.

"I think, sweetheart," said Gerard, "that our next rendezvous will not be interrupted by the Sieur du Malinbois and his chatelaine."

But Fleurette was still bemused with wonder, and could only answer him with a kiss.

The City of the Singing Flame (original version)

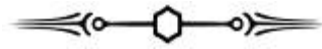


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Foreword



WE HAD BEEN friends for a decade or more, and I knew Giles Angarth as well as anyone could purport to know him. Yet the thing was no less a mystery to me than to others at the time, and it is still a mystery. Sometimes I think that he and Ebbonly had designed it all between them as a huge, insoluble hoax; that they are still alive, somewhere, and are laughing at the world that has been so sorely baffled by their disappearance. And sometimes I make tentative plans to re-visit Crater Ridge and find, if I can, the two boulders mentioned in Angarth's narrative as having a vague resemblance to broken-down columns. In the meanwhile no one has uncovered any trace of the missing men or has heard even the faintest rumor concerning them; and the whole affair, it would seem, is likely to remain a most singular and exasperating riddle.

Angarth, whose fame as a writer of fantastic fiction will probably outlive that of most other modern magazine contributors, had been spending that summer among the Sierras, and had been living alone till the artist Felix Ebbonly went to visit him. Ebbonly, whom I had never met, was well known for his imaginative paintings and drawings; and he had illustrated more than one of Angarth's novels. When neighboring campers became alarmed over the prolonged absence of the two men and the cabin was searched for some possible clue, a package addressed to me was found lying on the table; and I received it in due course of time, after reading many newspaper speculations regarding the double vanishment. The package contained a small, leather-bound notebook. Angarth had written on the fly-leaf:

Dear Hastane,

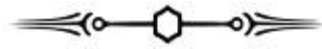
You can publish this journal sometime, if you like. People will think it the last and wildest of all my fictions — unless they take it for one of your own. In either case, it will be just as well. Good-bye.

Faithfully,

Giles Angarth.

I am now publishing the journal, which will doubtless meet the reception he predicted. But I am not so certain myself, as to whether the tale is truth or fabrication. The only way to make sure will be to locate the two boulders; and anyone who has ever seen Crater Ridge, and has wandered over its miles of rock-strewn desolation, will realize the difficulties of such a task.

The Journal



JULY 31ST, 1930. I have never acquired the diary-keeping habit — mainly, no doubt, because of my uneventful mode of existence, in which there has seldom been anything to chronicle. But the thing which happened this morning is so extravagantly strange, so remote from mundane laws and parallels, that I feel impelled to write it down to the best of my understanding and ability. Also, I shall keep account of the possible repetition and continuation of my experience. It will be perfectly safe to do this, for no one who ever reads the record will be likely to believe it.

I had gone for a walk on Crater Ridge, which lies a mile or less to the north of my cabin near Summit. Though differing markedly in its character from the usual landscapes roundabout, it is one of my favorite places. It is exceptionally bare and desolate, with little more in the way of vegetation than mountain sun-flowers, wild currant-bushes, and a few sturdy, wind-warped pines and supple tamaracks. Geologists deny it a volcanic origin; yet its outcroppings of rough, nodular stone and enormous rubble-heaps have all the air of scoriac remains — at least, to my non-scientific eye. They look like the slag and refuse of Cyclopean furnaces, poured out in pre-human years, to cool and harden into shapes of limitless grotesquery. Among them are stones that suggest the fragments of primordial bas-reliefs, or small prehistoric idols and figurines; and others that seem to have been graven with lost letters of an indecipherable script. Unexpectedly, there is a little tarn lying on one end of the long, dry Ridge — a tarn that has never been fathomed. The hill is an odd interlude among the granite sheets and crags, and the fir-clothed ravines and valleys of this region.

It was a clear, windless morning and I paused often to view the magnificent perspectives of varied scenery that were visible on every hand — the titan battlements of Castle Peak the rude masses of Donner Peak, with its dividing pass of hemlocks the remote luminous blue of the Nevada Mountains, and the soft green of willows in the valley at my feet. It was an aloof, silent world and I heard no sound other than the dry, crackling noise of cicadas among the currant-bushes.

I strolled on in a zig-zag manner for some distance and coming to one of the rubble-fields with which the Ridge is interstrewn, I began to search the ground closely, hoping to find a stone that was sufficiently quaint and grotesque in its form to be worth keeping as a curiosity. I had found several such in my previous wanderings. Suddenly I came to a clear space amid the rubble, in which nothing grew — a space that was round as an artificial ring. In the center were two isolated boulders, queerly alike in shape, and lying about five feet apart. I paused to examine them. Their substance, a dull, greenish-grey stone, seemed to be different from anything else in the neighborhood; and I conceived at once the weird, unwarrantable fancy that they might be the pedestals of vanished columns, worn away by incalculable years till there remained only these sunken ends. Certainly the perfect roundness and uniformity of the boulders was peculiar; and though I possess a smattering of geology, I could not identify their smooth, soapy material.

My imagination was excited, and I began to indulge in some rather overheated fantasies. But the wildest of these was a homely commonplace in comparison with the thing that happened when I took a single step forward in the vacant space immediately between the two boulders. I shall try to describe it to the utmost of my verbal ability though human language

is naturally wanting in words that are adequate for the delineation of events and sensations beyond the normal scope of human experience.

Nothing is more disconcerting than to miscalculate the degree of descent in taking a step. Imagine then what it was like to step forward on level, open ground, and find utter nothingness underfoot! I seemed to be going down into an empty gulf, and at the same time the landscape before me vanished in a swirl of broken images and everything went blind. There was a feeling of intense, hyperborean cold, and an indescribable sickness and vertigo possessed me, due, no doubt, to the profound disturbance of equilibrium. Also — either from the speed of my descent or for some other reason — I was totally unable to draw breath. My thoughts and feelings were unutterably confused, and half the time it seemed to me that I was falling *upward* rather than downward, or was sliding horizontally or at some oblique angle. At last I had the sensation of turning a complete somersault; and then I found myself standing erect on solid ground once more, without the least shock or jar of impact. The darkness cleared away from my vision, but I was still dizzy, and the optical images I received were altogether meaningless for some moments.

When finally I recovered the power of cognizance, and was able to view my surroundings with a measure of perception, I experienced a mental confusion equivalent to that of a man who might find himself cast without warning on the shore of some foreign planet. There was the same sense of utter loss and alienation which would assuredly be felt in such a case — the same vertiginous, overwhelming bewilderment, the same ghastly sense of separation from all the familiar environmental details that give color and form and definition to our lives and even determine our very personalities.

I was standing in the midst of a landscape which bore no degree or manner of resemblance to Crater Ridge. A long, gradual slope, covered with

violet grass and studded at intervals with stones of monolithic size and shape, ran undulantly away beneath me to a broad plain with sinuous, open meadows and high, stately forests of an unknown vegetation whose predominant hues were purple and yellow. The plain seemed to end in a wall of impenetrable golden-brownish mist, that rose with phantom pinnacles to dissolve on a sky of luminescent amber in which there was no sun.

In the foreground of this amazing scene, not more than two or three miles away, there loomed a city whose massive towers and mountainous ramparts of red stone were such as the Anakim of undiscovered worlds might build. Wall on beetling wall, and spire on giant spire, it soared to confront the heavens, maintaining everywhere the severe and solemn lines of a wholly rectilinear architecture. It seemed to overwhelm and crush down the beholder with its stern and crag-like imminence.

As I viewed this city, I forgot my initial sense of bewildering loss and alienage, in an awe with which something of actual terror was mingled; and, at the same time, I felt an obscure but profound allurements, the cryptic emanation of some enslaving spell. But after I had gazed awhile, the cosmic strangeness and bafflement of my unthinkable position returned upon me; and I felt only a wild desire to escape from the maddeningly oppressive bizarrerie of this region and regain my own world. In an effort to fight down my agitation, I tried to figure out if possible what had really happened.

I had read a number of trans-dimensional stories — in fact, I had written one or two myself; and I had often pondered the possibility of other worlds or material planes which may co-exist in the same space with ours, invisible and impalpable to human senses. Of course, I realized at once that I had fallen into some such dimension. Doubtless, when I took that step forward between the boulders, I had been precipitated into some sort of flaw or

fissure in space, to emerge at the bottom in this alien sphere — in a totally different kind of space. It sounded simple enough in a way — but not simple enough to make the *modus operandi* anything but a brain-racking mystery.

In a further effort to collect myself, I studied my immediate surroundings with a close attention. This time, I was impressed by the arrangement of the monolithic stones I have spoken of, many of which were disposed at fairly regular intervals in two parallel lines running down the hill, as if to mark the course of some ancient road obliterated by the purple grass. Turning to follow its ascent, I saw right behind me two columns, standing at precisely the same distance apart as the two odd boulders on Crater Ridge, and formed of the same soapy, greenish-grey stone! The pillars were perhaps nine feet high, and had been taller at one time, since the tops were splintered and broken away. Not far above them, the mounting slope vanished from view in a great bank of the same golden-brown mist that enveloped the remoter plain. But there were no more monoliths — and it seemed as if the road had ended with those pillars.

Inevitably I began to speculate as to the relationship between the columns in this new dimension and the boulders in my own world. Surely the resemblance could not be a matter of mere chance. If I stepped between the columns, could I return to the human sphere by a reversal of my precipitation therefrom? And if so, by what inconceivable beings from foreign time and space had the columns and boulders been established as the portals of a gateway between the two worlds? Who could have used the gateway, and for what purpose? My brain reeled before the infinite vistas of surmise that were opened by such questions.

However, what concerned me most was the problem of getting back to Crater Ridge. The weirdness of it all, the monstrous walls of the nearby

town, the unnatural hues and forms of the outlandish scenery, were too much for human nerves; and I felt that I should go mad if forced to remain long in such a milieu. Also, there was no telling what hostile powers or entities I might encounter if I stayed. The slope and plain were devoid of animate life, as far as I could see; but the great city was presumptive proof of its existence. Unlike the heroes in my own tales, who were wont to visit the fifth dimension or the worlds of Algol with perfect *sang froid*, I did not feel in the least adventurous; and I shrank back with man's instinctive recoil before the unknown. With one fearful glance at the looming city and the wide plain with its lofty, gorgeous vegetation, I turned and stepped back between the columns.

There was the same instantaneous plunge into blind and freezing gulfs, the same indeterminate falling and twisting, that had marked my descent into this new dimension. At the end I found myself standing, very dizzy and shaken, on the same spot from which I had taken my forward step between the greenish-grey boulders. Crater Ridge was swirling and reeling about me as if in the throes of earthquake; and I had to sit down for a minute or two before I could recover my equilibrium.

I came back to the cabin like a man in a dream. The experience seemed, and still seems, incredible and unreal; and yet it has overshadowed everything else, and has colored and dominated all my thoughts. Perhaps by writing it down I can shake it off a little. It has unsettled me more than any previous experience in my whole life, and the world about me seems hardly less improbable and nightmarish than the one that I have penetrated in a fashion so fortuitous.

August 2nd. I have done a lot of thinking in the past few days — and the more I ponder and puzzle, the more mysterious it all becomes. Granting the flaw in space, which must be an absolute vacuum, impervious to air, ether,

light and matter, how was it possible for me to fall into it? And having fallen in, how could I fall out — particularly into a sphere that has no certifiable relationship with ours? ...But, after all, one process would be as easy as the other, in theory. The main objection is: how could one move in a vacuum, either up or down or backward or forward? The whole thing would baffle the comprehension of an Einstein; and I do not feel that I have even approached the true solution.

Also, I have been fighting the temptation to go back, if only to convince myself that the thing really occurred. But, after all, why shouldn't I go back? An opportunity has been vouchsafed to me such as no man may ever have been given before; and the wonders I shall see and the secrets I shall learn are beyond imagining. My nervous trepidation is inexcusably childish under the circumstances.

August 3rd. I went back this morning, armed with a revolver. Somehow, without thinking that it might make a difference, I did not step in the very middle of the space between the boulders. Undoubtedly as a result of this, my descent was more prolonged and impetuous than before, and seemed to consist mainly of a series of spiral somersaults. It must have taken me minutes to recover from the ensuing vertigo; and when I came to, I was lying on the violet grass.

This time, I went boldly down the slope; and keeping as much as I could in the shelter of the bizarre purple and yellow vegetation, I stole toward the looming city. All was very still; and there was no breath of wind in those exotic trees, which appeared to imitate in their lofty upright boles and horizontal foliage the severe architectural lines of the Cyclopean buildings.

I had not gone far when I came to a road in the forest — a road paved with stupendous blocks of stone at least twenty feet square. It ran toward the city. I thought for awhile that it was wholly deserted — perhaps disused;

and I even dared to walk upon it, till I heard a noise behind me and turning saw the approach of several singular entities. Terrified, I sprang back and hid myself in a thicket, from which I watched the passing of those creatures, wondering fearfully if they had seen me. Apparently my fears were groundless, for they did not even glance at my hiding-place.

It is hard for me to describe or even visualize them now, for they were totally unlike anything that we are accustomed to think of as human or animal. They must have been ten feet tall and they were moving along with colossal strides that took them from sight in a few instants beyond a turn of the road. Their bodies were bright and shining, as if encased in some sort of armor; and their heads were equipped with high, curving appendages of opalescent hues which nodded above them like fantastic plumes, but may have been antennae or other sense-organs of a novel type.

Trembling with excitement and wonder, I continued my progress through the richly-colored undergrowth. As I went on, I perceived for the first time that there were no shadows anywhere. The light came from all portions of the sunless amber heaven, pervading everything with a soft, uniform luminosity. All was motionless and silent, as I have said before; and there was no evidence of bird, insect or animal life in all this preternatural landscape. But when I had advanced to within a mile of the city (as well as I could judge the distance in a realm where the very proportions of objects were unfamiliar) I became aware of something which at first was recognizable as a vibration rather than a sound. There was a queer thrilling in my nerves, the disquieting sense of some unknown force or emanation flowing through my body. This was perceptible for some time before I heard the music; but having heard it, my auditory nerves identified it at once with the vibration.

It was faint and far-off, and seemed to emanate from the very heart of the titan city. The melody was piercingly sweet and resembled at times the singing of some voluptuous feminine voice. However, no human voice could have possessed the unearthly pitch, the shrill, perpetually sustained notes that somehow suggested the light of remote worlds and stars translated into sound.

Ordinarily I am not very sensitive to music; I have even been reproached for not reacting more strongly to it. But I had not gone much farther when I realized the peculiar mental and emotional spell which the far-off sound was beginning to exert upon me. There was a siren-like allurements which drew me on, forgetful of the strangeness and potential perils of my situation; and I felt a slow, drug-like intoxication of brain and senses. In some insidious manner, I know not how nor why, the music conveyed the ideas of vast but attainable space and altitude, of superhuman freedom and exultation; and it seemed to promise all the impossible splendors of which my imagination has vaguely dreamt.

The forest continued almost to the city walls. Peering from behind the final boscage, I saw their overwhelming battlements in the sky above me, and noted the flawless jointure of their prodigious blocks. I was near the great road, which entered an open gate large enough to admit the passage of behemoths. There were no guards in sight; and several more of the tall, gleaming entities came striding along and went in as I watched. From where I stood, I was unable to see inside the gate, for the wall was stupendously thick. The music poured from that mysterious entrance in an ever-strengthening flood, and sought to draw me on with its weird seduction, eager for unimaginable things.

It was hard to resist, hard to rally my will-power and turn back. I tried to concentrate on the thought of danger — but the thought was tenuously

unreal. At last I tore myself away and retraced my footsteps, very slowly and lingeringly, till I was beyond reach of the music. Even then the spell persisted, like the effects of a drug; and all the way home I was tempted to return and follow those shining giants into the city.

August 5th. I have visited the new dimension once more. I thought I could resist that summoning music; and I even took some cotton-wadding along with which to stuff my ears if it should affect me too strongly. I began to hear the supernal melody at the same distance as before, and was drawn onward in the same manner. But this time I entered the open gate!

I wonder if I can describe that city. I felt like a crawling ant upon its mammoth pavements, amid the measureless Babel of its buildings, of its streets and arcades. Everywhere there were columns, obelisks, and the perpendicular pylons of fane-like structures that would have dwarfed those of Thebes and Heliopolis.

And the people of the city! How is one to depict them or give them a name? I think that the gleaming entities I first saw are not the true inhabitants, but are only visitors — perhaps from some other world or dimension, like myself. The real people are giants too; but they move slowly, with solemn, hieratic paces. Their bodies are nude and swart, and their limbs are those of caryatides — massive enough, it would seem, to uphold the roofs and lintels of their own buildings. I fear to describe them minutely: for human words would give the idea of something monstrous and uncouth; and these beings are not monstrous but they have merely developed in obedience to the laws of another evolution than ours, the environmental forces and conditions of a different world.

Somehow, I was not afraid when I saw them — perhaps the music had drugged me till I was beyond fear. There was a group of them just inside the gate, and they seemed to pay me no attention whatever as I passed them.

The opaque, jet-like orbs of their huge eyes were impassive as the carven eyes of andro-sphinxes, and they uttered no sound from their heavy, straight, expressionless lips. Perhaps they lack the sense of hearing; for their strange, semi-rectangular heads were devoid of anything in the nature of external ears.

I followed the music, which was still remote and seemed to increase little in loudness. I was soon overtaken by several of those beings whom I had previously seen on the road outside the walls; and they passed me quickly and disappeared in the labyrinth of buildings. After them there came other beings, of a less gigantic kind, and without the bright shards or armor worn by the first-comers. Then, overhead, two creatures with long, translucent, blood-colored wings, intricately veined and ribbed, came flying side by side and vanished behind the others. Their faces, featured with organs of unsurmisable use, were not those of animals; and I felt sure that they were beings of a high order of development.

I saw hundreds of those slow-moving, somber entities whom I have identified as the true inhabitants. But none of them appeared to notice me. Doubtless they were accustomed to seeing far weirder and more unusual kinds of life than humanity. As I went on, I was overtaken by dozens of improbable-looking creatures, all going in the same direction as myself, as if drawn by the same siren melody.

Deeper and deeper I went into the wilderness of colossal architecture, led by that remote, ethereal, opiate music. I soon noticed a sort of gradual ebb and flow in the sound, occupying an interval of ten minutes or more; but by imperceptible degrees it grew sweeter and nearer. I wondered how it could penetrate that manifold maze of builded stone and be heard outside the walls.

I must have walked for miles, in the ceaseless gloom of those rectangular structures that hung above me, tier on tier, at an awful height in the amber zenith. Then, at length, I came to the core and secret of it all. Preceded and followed by a number of those chimerical entities, I emerged on a great square in whose center was a temple-like building more immense than the others. The music poured, imperiously shrill and loud, from its many-columned entrance.

I felt the thrill of one who approaches the sanctum of some hierarchal mystery, when I entered the halls of that building. People who must have come from many different worlds or dimensions, went with me and before me along the titanic colonnades whose pillars were graven with indecipherable runes and enigmatic bas-reliefs. Also, the dark, colossal inhabitants of the town were standing or roaming about, intent, like all the others, on their own affairs. None of these beings spoke, either to me or to one another; and though several eyed me casually, my presence was evidently taken for granted.

There are no words to convey the incomprehensible wonder of it all. And the music? I have utterly failed to describe that, also. It was as if some marvellous elixir had been turned into sound-waves — an elixir conferring the gift of superhuman life, and the high, magnificent dreams which are dreamt by the Immortals. It mounted in my brain like a supernal drunkenness as I approached the hidden source.

I do not know what obscure warning prompted me now to stuff my ears with cotton ere I went any farther. Though I could still hear it, still feel its peculiar, penetrant vibration, the sound became muted when I had done this; and its influence was less powerful henceforward. There is little doubt that I owe my life to this simple and homely precaution.

The endless rows of columns grew dim for awhile as the interior of a long, basaltic cavern; and then, at some distance ahead, I perceived the glimmering of a soft light on the floor and pillars. The light soon became an overflowing radiance, as if gigantic lamps were being lit in the temple's heart; and the vibrations of the hidden music pulsed more strongly in my nerves.

The hall ended in a chamber of immense, indefinite scope, whose walls and roof were doubtful with unremoving shadows. In the center, amid the pavement of mammoth blocks, there was a circular pit above which seemed to float a fountain of flame that soared in one perpetual, slowly lengthening jet. This flame was the sole illumination; and also it was the source of the wild, unearthly music. Even with my purposely deafened ears, I was wooed by the shrill and starry sweetness of its singing; and I felt the voluptuous lure and the high, vertiginous exaltation.

I knew immediately that the place was a shrine, and that the trans-dimensional beings who accompanied me were visiting pilgrims. There were scores of them — perhaps hundreds; but all were dwarfed in the cosmic immensity of that chamber. They were gathered before the flame in various attitudes of worship; they bowed their exotic heads, or made mysterious gestures or adoration with unhuman hands and members. And the voices of several, deep as booming drums, or sharp as the stridulation of giant insects, were audible amid the singing of the fountain.

Spell-bound, I went forward and joined them. Enthralled by the music and by the vision of the soaring flame, I paid as little heed to my outlandish companions as they to me.

The fountain rose and rose, till its light flickered on the limbs and features of throned, colossal statues behind it — heroes or gods or demons from the earlier cycles of alien time, staring in stone from a dusk of

illimitable mystery. The fire was white and dazzling, it was pure as the central flame of a star; it blinded me, and when I turned my eyes away, the air was filled with webs of intricate color, with swiftly changing arabesques whose numberless, unwonted hues and patterns were such as no mundane eye had ever beheld. I felt a stimulating warmth that filled my very marrow with intenser life.

The music mounted with the flame; and I understood now its recurrent ebb and flow. As I looked and listened, a mad thought was born in my mind — the thought of how marvellous and ecstatic it would be to run forward and leap headlong into the singing fire. The music seemed to tell me that I should find in that moment of flaring dissolution all the delight and triumph, all the splendor and exaltation it had promised from afar. It besought me; it pleaded with tones of supernal melody; and despite the wadding in my ears, the seduction was well-nigh irresistible.

However, it had not robbed me of all sanity. With a sudden start of terror, like one who has been tempted to fling himself from a high precipice, I drew back. Then I saw that the same dreadful impulse was shared by some of my companions. The two entities with scarlet wings, whom I have previously mentioned, were standing a little apart from the rest of us. Now, with a great fluttering, they rose and flew toward the flame like moths toward a candle. For a brief moment the light shone redly through their half-transparent wings, ere they disappeared in the leaping incandescence, which flared briefly and then burned as before.

Then, in rapid succession, a number of other beings who represented the most divergent trends of biology, sprang forward and immolated themselves in the flame. There were creatures with translucent bodies, and some that shone with all the hues of the opal; there were winged colossi, and titans who strode as with seven-league boots; and there was one being with

useless abortive wings, who crawled rather than ran, to seek the same glorious doom as the rest. But among them there were none of the city's people: these merely stood and looked on, impassive and statue-like as ever.

I saw that the fountain had now reached its greatest height and was beginning to decline. It sank steadily but slowly to half its former elevation. During this interval there were no more acts of self-sacrifice; and several of the beings beside me turned abruptly and went away, as if they had overcome the lethal spell. One of the tall, armored entities, as he left, addressed me in words that were like clarion-notes, with unmistakable accents of warning. By a mighty effort of will, in a turmoil of conflicting emotions, I followed him. At every step the madness and delirium of the music strove with my instincts of self-preservation. More than once I started to go back. My homeward journey was blurred and doubtful as the wanderings of a man in an opium-trance; and the music sang behind me and told me of the rapture I had missed, of the flaming doom whose brief instant was better than aeons of mortal life.

August 9th. I have tried to go on with a new story, but have made no progress. Anything that I can imagine, or frame in language, seems flat and puerile beside the world of unsearchable mystery to which I have found admission. The temptation to return is more cogent than ever, the call of that remembered music is sweeter than the voice of a loved woman. And always I am tormented by the problem of it all, and tantalized by the little which I have perceived and understood. What forces are these whose existence and working I have merely apprehended? Who are the inhabitants of the city? And who are the beings that visit the enshrined flame? What rumor or legend has drawn them from outland realms and ulterior planets to that place of inenarrable danger and destruction? And what is the fountain

itself, and what the secret of its lure and its deadly singing? These problems admit of infinite surmise, but no conceivable solution.

I am planning to go back once more — but not alone. Someone must go with me this time, as a witness to the wonder and the peril. It is all too strange for credence — I must have human corroboration of what I have seen and felt and conjectured. Also, another might understand where I have failed to do more than apprehend.

Who shall I take? It will be necessary to invite someone here from the outer world — someone of high intellectual and aesthetic capacity. Shall I ask Philip Hastane, my fellow fiction-writer? Hastane would be too busy, I fear. But there is the Californian artist, Felix Ebbonly, who has illustrated some of my fantastic novels. Ebbonly would be the man to see and appreciate the new dimension, if he can come. With his bent for the bizarre and unearthly, the spectacle of that plain and city, the Babelian buildings and arcades, and the temple of the flame, will simply enthrall him. I shall write immediately to his San Francisco address.

August 12th. Ebbonly is here — the mysterious hints in my letter, regarding some novel pictorial subjects along his own line, were too provocative for him to resist. Now I have explained fully and given him a detailed account of my adventures. I can see that he is a little incredulous, for which I hardly blame him. But he will not remain incredulous for long, for tomorrow we shall visit together the city of the singing flame.

August 13th. I must concentrate my disordered faculties, I must choose my words and write with exceeding care. This will be the last entry in my journal, and the last writing I shall ever do. When I have finished, I shall wrap the journal up and address it to Philip Hastane, who can make such disposition of it as he sees fit.

I took Ebbonly into the other dimension today. He was impressed, even as I had been, by the two isolated boulders on Crater Ridge.

“They look like the guttered ends of columns established by pre-human gods,” he remarked. “I begin to believe you now.”

I told him to go first, and indicated the place where he should step. He obeyed without hesitation, and I had the singular experience of seeing a man melt into utter, instantaneous nothingness. One moment he was there — and the next, there was only bare ground, and the far-off tamaracks whose view his body had obstructed. I followed, and found him standing in speechless awe on the violet grass.

“This,” he said at last, “is the sort of thing whose existence I have hitherto merely suspected, and have never even been able to hint in my most imaginative drawings.”

We spoke little as we followed the lines of monolithic boulders toward the plain. Far in the distance, beyond those high and stately trees with their sumptuous foliage, the golden-brown vapors had parted, showing the pale vistas of an immense horizon; and past the horizon were range on range of gleaming orbs and fiery, flying motes in the depth of that amber heaven. It was as if the veil of another universe than ours had been drawn back.

We crossed the plain, and came at length within ear-shot of the siren music. I warned Ebbonly to stuff his ears with cotton-wadding, but he refused.

“I don’t want to deaden any new sensations which I may experience,” he observed.

We entered the city. My companion was in a veritable rhapsody of artistic delight when he beheld the enormous buildings and the people. I could see, too, that the music had taken hold upon him: his look soon became fixed and dreamy as that of an opium-eater. At first he made many

comments on the architecture and the various beings who passed us, and called my attention to details which I had not perceived before. However, as we drew nearer to the temple of the flame, his observational interest seemed to flag, and was replaced by more and more of an ecstatic inward absorption. His remarks became fewer and briefer; and he did not even seem to hear my questions. It was evident that the sound had wholly bemused and bewitched him.

Even as on my former visit, there were many pilgrims going toward the shrine — and few that were coming away from it. Most of them belonged to evolutionary types that I had seen before. Among those that were new to me, I recall one gorgeous creature with golden and cerulean wings like those of a giant lepidopter, and scintillating, jewel-like eyes that must have been designed to mirror the glories of some Edenic world.

I too felt, as before, the captious thralldom and bewitchment, the insidious, gradual perversion of thought and instinct, as if the music were working in my brain like a subtle alkaloid. Since I had taken my usual precaution, my subjection to the influence was less complete than that of Ebbonly; but nevertheless it was enough to make me forget a number of things — among them, the initial concern which I had felt when my companion refused to employ the same mode of protection as myself. I no longer thought of his danger or my own, except as something very distant and immaterial.

The streets were like the prolonged and wildering labyrinth of a nightmare. But the music led us forthrightly; and always there were other pilgrims. Like men in the grip of some powerful current, we were drawn to our destination.

As we passed along the hall of gigantic columns and neared the abode of the fiery fountain, a sense of our peril quickened momentarily in my brain,

and I sought to warn Ebbonly once more. But all my protests and remonstrances were futile: he was deaf as a machine, and wholly impervious to anything but the lethal music. His expression and his movements were those of a somnambulist. Even when I seized and shook him with such violence as I could muster, he remained oblivious.

The throng of worshippers was larger than upon my first visit. The jet of pure, incandescent flame was mounting steadily as we entered, and it sang with the white ardor and ecstasy of a star alone in space. Again, with ineffable tones, it told me the rapture of a moth-like death in its lofty soaring, the exultation and triumph of a momentary union with its elemental essence.

The flame rose to its apex; and even for me, the mesmeric lure was well-nigh irresistible. Many of our companions succumbed; and the first to immolate himself was the giant lepidopterous being. Four others, of diverse evolutionary types, followed in appallingly swift succession.

In my own partial subjection to the music, my own effort to resist that deadly enslavement, I had almost forgotten the very presence of Ebbonly. It was too late for me to even think of stopping him, when he ran forward in a series of leaps that were both solemn and frenzied, like the beginning of some sacerdotal dance, and hurled himself headlong into the flame. The fire enveloped him, it flared up for an instant with a more dazzling whiteness; and that was all.

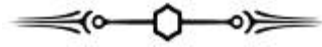
Slowly, as if from benumbed brain-centers, a horror crept upon my conscious mind, and helped to annul the perilous mesmerism. I turned, while many others were following Ebbonly's example, and fled from the shrine and from the city. But somehow the horror diminished as I went; and more and more, I found myself envying my companion's fate, and

wondering as to the sensations he had felt in that moment of fiery dissolution...

Now, as I write this, I am wondering why I came back again to the human world. Words are futile to express what I have beheld and experienced; and the change that has come upon me, beneath the play of incalculable forces in a world of which no other mortal is even cognizant. Literature is nothing more than the shadow of a shadow; and life, with its drawn-out length of monotonous, reiterative days, is unreal and without meaning now in comparison with the splendid death which I might have had — the glorious doom which is still in store. I have no longer any will to fight the ever-insistent music which I hear in memory. And — there seems to be no reason at all why I should fight it. Tomorrow, I shall return to the city.

The City of the Singing Flame (later version)

Combined with “Beyond the Singing Flame”



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Foreword



WHEN GILES ANGARTH disappeared, nearly two years ago, we had been friends for a decade or more, and I knew him as well as anyone could purport to know him. Yet the thing was no less a mystery to me than to others at the time, and until now, it has remained a mystery.

Like the rest, I sometimes thought that he and Ebbonly had designed it all between them as a huge, insoluble hoax; that they were still alive, somewhere, and laughing at the world that was so sorely baffled by their disappearance. And, until I at last decided to visit Crater Ridge and find, if I could, the two boulders mentioned in Angarth's narrative, no one had uncovered any trace of the missing men or heard even the faintest rumor concerning them. The whole affair, it seemed then, was likely to remain a most singular and exasperating riddle.

Angarth, whose fame as a writer of fantastic fiction was already very considerable, had been spending that summer among the Sierras, and had been living alone until the artist, Felix Ebbonly, went to visit him. Ebbonly, whom I had never met, was well known for his imaginative paintings and drawings, and had illustrated more than one of Angarth's novels.

When neighboring campers became alarmed over the prolonged absence of the two men, and the cabin was searched for some possible clue, a package addressed to me was found lying on the table; and I received it in due course of time, after reading many newspaper speculations concerning the double vanishment. The package contained a small, leather-bound notebook, and Angarth had written on the fly-leaf:

‘Dear Hastane, You can publish this journal sometime, if you like. People will think it the last and wildest of all my fictions — unless they

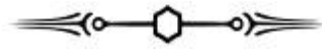
take it for one of your own. In either case, it will be just as well. Good-bye.

Faithfully, GILES ANGARTH.'

Feeling that it would certainly meet with the reception he anticipated, and being unsure, myself, whether the tale was truth or fabrication, I delayed publishing his journal. Now, from my own experience, I have become satisfied of its reality; and am finally printing it, together with an account of my personal adventures. Perhaps, the double publication, preceded as it is by Angarth's return to mundane surroundings, will help to ensure the acceptance of the whole story for more than mere fantasy.

Still, when I recall my own doubts, I wonder... But let the reader decide for himself. And first, as to Giles Angarth's journal:

I. The Dimension Beyond



July 31st, 1938. — I have never acquired the diary-keeping habit — mainly, because of my uneventful, mode of existence, in which there has seldom been anything to chronicle. But the thing which happened this morning is so extravagantly strange, so remote from mundane laws and parallels, that I feel impelled to write it down to the best of my understanding and ability. Also, I shall keep account of the possible repetition and continuation of my experience. It will be perfectly safe to do this, for no one who ever reads the record will be likely to believe it...

I had gone for a walk on Crater Ridge, which lies a mile or less to the north of my cabin near Summit. Though differing markedly in its character from the usual landscapes round about, it is one of my favorite places. It is exceptionally bare and desolate, with little more in the way of vegetation than mountain sunflowers, wild currant bushes, and a few sturdy, wind-warped pines and supple tamaracks.

Geologists deny it a volcanic origin; yet its outcroppings of rough, nodular stone and enormous rubble-heaps have all the air of scoriac remains — at least, to my non-scientific eye. They look like the slag and refuse of Cyclopean furnaces, poured out in pre-human years, to cool and harden into shapes of limitless grotesquerie.

Among them are stones that suggest the fragments of primordial bas-reliefs, or small prehistoric idols and figurines; and others that seem to have been graven with lost letters of an indecipherable script. Unexpectedly, there is a little tarn lying on one end of the long, dry Ridge — a tarn that has never been fathomed. The hill is an odd interlude among the granite sheets and crags, and the fir-clothed ravines and valleys of this region.

It was a clear, windless morning, and I paused often to view the magnificent perspectives of varied scenery that were visible on every hand — the titan battlements of Castle Peak; the rude masses of Donner Peak, with its dividing pass of hemlocks; the remote, luminous blue of the Nevada Mountains, and the soft green of willows in the valley at my feet. It was an aloof, silent world, and I heard no sound other than the dry, crackling noise of cicadas among the currant-bushes.

I strolled on in a zigzag manner for some distance, and coming to one of the rubble-fields with which the Ridge is interstrewn, I began to search the ground closely, hoping to find a stone that was sufficiently quaint and grotesque in its form to be worth keeping as a curiosity: I had found several such in my previous wanderings. Suddenly, I came to a clear space amid the rubble, in which nothing grew — a space that was round as an artificial ring. In the center were two isolated boulders, queerly alike in shape, and lying about five feet apart.

I paused to examine them. Their substance, a dull, greenish-grey stone, seemed to be different from anything else in the neighborhood; and I conceived at once the weird, unwarrantable fancy that they might be the pedestals of vanished columns, worn away by incalculable years till there remained only these sunken ends. Certainly, the perfect roundness and uniformity of the boulders was peculiar, and though I possess a smattering of geology, I could not identify their smooth, soapy material.

My imagination was excited, and I began to indulge in some rather overheated fantasies. But the wildest of these was a homely commonplace in comparison with the thing that happened when I took a single step forward in the vacant space immediately between the two boulders. I shall try to describe it to the utmost of my ability; though human language is

naturally wanting in words that are adequate for the delineation of events and sensations beyond the normal scope of human experience.

Nothing is more disconcerting than to miscalculate the degree of descent in taking a step. Imagine, then, what it was like to step forward on level, open ground, and find utter nothingness underfoot! I seemed to be going down into an empty gulf; and, at the same time, the landscape before me vanished in a swirl of broken images and everything went blind. There was a feeling of intense, hyperborean cold, and an indescribable sickness and vertigo possessed me, due, no doubt, to the profound disturbance of equilibrium. Either from the speed of my descent or for some other reason, I was, too, totally unable to draw breath.

My thoughts and feelings were unutterably confused, and half the time it seemed to me that I was falling upward rather than downward, or was sliding horizontally or at some oblique angle. At last, I had the sensation of turning a complete somersault; and then I found myself standing erect on solid ground once more, without the least shock or jar of impact. The darkness cleared away from my vision, but I was still dizzy, and the optical images I received were altogether meaningless for some moments.

When, finally, I recovered the power of cognisance and was able to view my surroundings with a measure of perception, I experienced a mental confusion equivalent to that of a man who might find himself cast without warning on the shore of some foreign planet. There was the same sense of utter loss and alienation which would assuredly be felt in such a case; the same vertiginous, overwhelming bewilderment, the same ghastly sense of separation from all the familiar environmental details that give color, form and definition to our lives and even determine our very personalities.

I was standing in the midst of a landscape which bore no degree or manner of resemblance to Crater Ridge. A long, gradual slope, covered with

violet grass and studded at intervals with stones of monolithic size and shape, ran undulantly away beneath me to a broad plain with sinuous, open meadows and high, stately forests of an unknown vegetation whose predominant hues were purple and yellow. The plain seemed to end in a wall of impenetrable, golden-brownish mist, that rose with phantom pinnacles to dissolve on a sky of luminescent amber in which there was no sun.

In the foreground of this amazing scene, not more than two or three miles away, there loomed a city whose massive towers and mountainous ramparts of red stone were such as the Anakim of undiscovered worlds might build. Wall on beetling wall, spire on giant spire, it soared to confront the heavens, maintaining everywhere the severe and solemn lines of a rectilinear architecture. It seemed to overwhelm and crush down the beholder with its stern and crag-like imminence.

As I viewed this city, I forgot my initial sense of bewildering loss and alienage, in an awe with which something of actual terror was mingled; and, at the same time, I felt an obscure but profound allurement, the cryptic emanation of some enslaving spell. But after I had gazed awhile, the cosmic strangeness and bafflement of my unthinkable position returned upon me, and I felt only a wild desire to escape from the maddeningly oppressive bizarrerie of this region and regain my own world. In an effort to fight down my agitation I tried to figure out, if possible, what had really happened.

I had read a number of transdimensional stories — in fact, I had written one or two myself; and I had often pondered the possibility of other worlds or material planes which may exist in the same space with ours, invisible and impalpable to human senses. Of course, I realized at once that I had fallen into some such dimension. Doubtless, when I took that step forward between the boulders, I had been precipitated into some sort of flaw or

fissure in space, to emerge at the bottom in this alien sphere — in a totally different kind of space.

It sounded simple enough, in a way, but not simple enough to make the *modus operandi* anything but a brainracking mystery, and in a further effort to collect myself, I studied my immediate surroundings with a close attention. This time, I was impressed by the arrangement of the monolithic stones I have spoken of, many of which were disposed at fairly regular intervals in two parallel lines running down the hill, as if to mark the course of some ancient road obliterated by the purple grass.

Turning to follow its ascent, I saw right behind me two columns, standing at precisely the same distance apart as the two odd boulders on Crater Ridge, and formed of the same soapy, greenish-gray stone. The pillars were perhaps nine feet high, and had been taller at one time, since the tops were splintered and broken away. Not far above them, the mounting slope vanished from view in a great bank of the same golden-brown mist that enveloped the remoter plain. But there were no more monoliths, and it seemed as if the road had ended with those pillars.

Inevitably, I began to speculate as to the relationship between the columns in this new dimension and the boulders in my own world. Surely, the resemblance could not be a matter of mere chance. If I stepped between the columns, could I return to the human sphere by a reversal of my precipitation therefrom? And if so, by what inconceivable beings from foreign time and space had the columns and boulders been established as the portals of a gateway between the two worlds? Who could have used the gateway, and for what purpose?

My brain reeled before the infinite vistas of surmise that were opened by such questions. However, what concerned me most was the problem of getting back to Crater Ridge. The weirdness of it all, the monstrous walls of

the near-by town, the unnatural hues and forms of the outlandish scenery, were too much for human nerves, and I felt that I should go mad if forced to remain long in such a milieu. Also, there was no telling what hostile powers or entities I might encounter if I stayed.

The slope and plain were devoid of animate life, as far as I could see; but the great city was presumptive proof of its existence. Unlike the heroes in my own tales, who were wont to visit the Fifth Dimension or the worlds of Algol with perfect *sang froid*, I did not feel in the least adventurous, and I shrank back with man's instinctive recoil before the unknown. With one fearful glance at the looming city and the wide plain with its lofty gorgeous vegetation, I turned and stepped back between the columns.

There was the same instantaneous plunge into blind and freezing gulfs, the same indeterminate falling and twisting, which had marked my descent into this new dimension. At the end I found myself standing, very dizzy and shaken, on the sane spot from which I had taken my forward step between the greenish-gray boulders. Crater Ridge was swirling and reeling about me as if in the throes of earthquake, and I had to sit down for a minute or two before I could recover my equilibrium.

I came back to the cabin like a man in a dream. The experience seemed, and still seems, incredible and unreal; and yet it has overshadowed everything else, and has colored and dominated all my thoughts. Perhaps, by writing it down, I can shake it off a little. It has unsettled me more than any previous experience in my whole life, and the world about me seems hardly less improbable and nightmarish than the one which I have penetrated in a fashion so fortuitous.

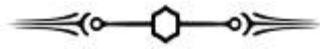
August 2nd. — I have done a lot of thinking in the past few days, and the more I ponder and puzzle, the more mysterious it all becomes. Granting the flaw in space, which must be an absolute vacuum, impervious to air, ether,

light and matter, how was it possible for me to fall into it? And having fallen in, how could I fall out — particularly into a sphere that has no certifiable relationship with ours?

But, after all, one process would be as easy as the other, in theory. The main objection is: how could one move in a vacuum, either up or down, or backward or forward? The whole thing would baffle the comprehension of an Einstein, and I cannot feel that I have even approached the true solution.

Also, I have been fighting the temptation to go back, if only to convince myself that the thing really occurred. But, after all, why shouldn't I go back? An opportunity has been vouchsafed to me such as no man may even have been given before, and the wonders I shall see, the secrets I shall learn, are beyond imagining. My nervous trepidation is inexcusably childish under the circumstances...

II. The Titan City



August 3rd. — I went back this morning, armed with a revolver. Somehow, without thinking that it might make a difference, I did not step in the very middle of the space between the boulders. Undoubtedly, as a result of this, my descent was more prolonged and impetuous than before, and seemed to consist mainly of a series of spiral somersaults. It must have taken me several minutes to recover from the ensuing vertigo, and when I came to, I was lying on the violet grass.

This time, I went boldly down the slope, and keeping as much as I could in the shelter of the bizarre purple and yellow vegetation, I stole toward the looming city. All was very still; there was no breath of wind in those exotic trees, which appeared to imitate, in their lofty, upright boles and horizontal foliage, the severe architectural lines of the Cyclopean buildings.

I had not gone far when I came to a road in the forest — a road paved with stupendous blocks of stone at least twenty feet square. It ran toward the city. I thought for a while that it was wholly deserted, perhaps disused; and I even dared to walk upon it, till I heard a noise behind me and, turning, saw the approach of several singular entities. Terrified, I sprang back and hid myself in a thicket, from which I watched the passing of those creatures, wondering fearfully if they had seen me. Apparently, my fears were groundless, for they did not even glance at my hiding place.

It is hard for me to describe or even visualize them now, for they were totally unlike anything that we are accustomed to think of as human or animal. They must have been ten feet tall, and they were moving along with colossal strides that took them from sight in a few instants, beyond a turn of the road. Their bodies were bright and shining, as if encased in some sort of

armor, and their heads were equipped with high, curving appendages of opalescent hues which nodded above them like fantastic plumes, but may have been antennae or other sense-organs of a novel type. Trembling with excitement and wonder, I continued my progress through the richly-colored undergrowth. As I went on, I perceived for the first time that there were no shadows anywhere. The light came from all portions of the sunless, amber heaven, pervading everything with a soft, uniform luminosity. All was motionless and silent, as before; and there was no evidence of bird, insect or animal life in all this preternatural landscape.

But, when I had advanced to within a mile of the city — as well as I could judge the distance in a realm where the very proportions of objects were unfamiliar — I became aware of something which at first was recognizable as a vibration rather than a sound. There was a queer thrilling in my nerves; the disquieting sense of some unknown force or emanation flowing through my body. This was perceptible for some time before I heard the music, but having heard it, my auditory nerves identified it at once with the vibration.

It was faint and far-off, and seemed to emanate from the very heart of the Titan city. The melody was piercingly sweet, and resembled at times the singing of some voluptuous feminine voice. However, no human voice could have possessed that unearthly pitch, the shrill, perpetually sustained notes that somehow suggested the light of remote worlds and stars translated into sound.

Ordinarily, I am not very sensitive to music; I have even been reproached for not reacting more strongly to it. But I had not gone much farther when I realized the peculiar mental and emotional spell which the far-off sound was beginning to exert upon me. There was a siren-like allurements which

drew me on, forgetful of the strangeness and potential perils of my situation; and I felt a slow, drug-like intoxication of brain and senses.

In some insidious manner, I know not how nor why, the music conveyed the ideas of vast but attainable space and altitude, of superhuman freedom and exultation; and it seemed to promise all the impossible splendors of which my imagination has vaguely dreamt...

The forest continued almost to the city walls. Peering from behind the final boscage, I saw their overwhelming battlements in the sky above me, and noted the flawless jointure of their prodigious blocks. I was near the great road, which entered an open gate large enough to admit the passage of behemoths. There were no guards in sight, and several more of the tall, gleaming entities came striding along and went in as I watched.

From where I stood, I was unable to see inside the gate, for the wall was stupendously thick. The music poured from that mysterious entrance in an ever-strengthening flood, and sought to draw me on with its weird seduction, eager for unimaginable things. It was hard to resist; hard to rally my will-power and turn back. I tried to concentrate on the thought of danger — but the thought was tenuously unreal.

At last, I tore myself away and retraced my footsteps, very slowly and lingeringly, till I was beyond reach of the music. Even then, the spell persisted, like the effects of a drug; and all the way home I was tempted to return and follow those shining giants into the city.

August 5th. — I have visited the new dimension once more. I thought I could resist that summoning music, and I even took some cotton-wadding with which to stuff my ears if it should affect me too strongly. I began to hear the supernal melody at the same distance as before, and was drawn onward in the same manner. But, this time, I entered the open gate!

I wonder if I can describe that city? I felt like a crawling ant upon its mammoth pavements, amid the measureless Babel of its buildings, of its streets and arcades. Everywhere there were columns, obelisks and the perpendicular pylons of fane-like structures that would have dwarfed those of Thebes and Heliopolis. And the people of the city! How is one to depict them, or give them a name!

I think that the gleaming entities I first saw are not the true inhabitants, but are only visitors, perhaps from some other world or dimension, like myself. The real people are giants, too; but they move slowly, with solemn, hieratic paces. Their bodies are nude and swart, and their limbs are those of caryatides — massive enough, it would seem, to uphold the roofs and lintels of their own buildings. I fear to describe them minutely, for human words would give the idea of something monstrous and uncouth, and these beings are not monstrous, but they have merely developed in obedience to the laws of another evolution than ours; the environmental forces and conditions of a different world.

Somehow, I was not afraid when I saw them — perhaps the music had dragged me till I was beyond fear. There was a group of them just inside the gate, and they seemed to pay me no attention whatever as I passed them. The opaque, jet-like orbs of their huge eyes were impassive as the carven eyes of androsphinxes, and they uttered no sound from their heavy, straight, expressionless lips. Perhaps they lack the sense of hearing, for their strange, semi-rectangular heads were devoid of anything in the nature of external ears.

I followed the music, which was still remote and seemed to increase little in loudness. I was soon overtaken by several of those beings whom I had previously seen on the road outside the walls; and they passed me quickly and disappeared in the labyrinth of buildings. After them there came other

beings of a less gigantic kind, and without the bright shards or armor worn by the first-comers. Then, overhead, two creatures with long, translucent, blood-colored wings, intricately veined and ribbed, came flying side by side and vanished behind the others. Their faces, featured with organs of unsurmisable use, were ant those of animals, and I felt sure that they were beings of a high order of development.

I saw hundreds of those slow-moving, somber entities whom I have identified as the true inhabitants, but none of them appeared to notice me. Doubtless they were accustomed to seeing far weirder and more unusual kinds of life than humanity. As I went on, I was overtaken by dozens of improbable-looking creatures, all going in the same direction as myself, as if drawn by the same siren melody.

Deeper and deeper I went into the wilderness of colossal architecture, led by that remote, ethereal, opiate music. I soon noticed a sort of gradual ebb and flow in the sound, occupying an interval of ten minutes or more; but, by imperceptible degrees, it grew sweeter and nearer. I wondered how it could penetrate that manifold maze of builded stone and be heard outside the walls...

I must have walked for miles, in the ceaseless gloom of those rectangular structures that hung above me, tier on tier, at an awful height in the amber zenith. Then, at length, I came to the core and secret of it all. Preceded and followed by a number of those chimerical entities, I emerged on a great square, in whose center was a temple-like building more immense than the others. The music poured, imperiously shrill and loud, from its many-columned entrance.

I felt the thrill of one who approaches the sanctum of some hierarchal mystery, when I entered the halls of that building. People who must have come from many different worlds or dimensions went with me, and before

me, along the titanic colonnades, whose pillars were graven with indecipherable runes and enigmatic bas-reliefs. The dark, colossal inhabitants of the town were standing or roaming about, intent, like all the others, on their own affairs. None of these beings spoke, either to me or to one another, and though several eyed me casually, my presence was evidently taken for granted.

There are no words to convey the incomprehensible wonder of it all. And the music? I have utterly failed to describe that, also. It was as if some marvellous elixir had been turned into sound-waves — an elixir conferring the gift of superhuman life, and the high, magnificent dreams which are dreamt by the Immortals. It mounted in my brain like a supernal drunkenness, as I approached the hidden source. I do not know what obscure warning prompted me, now, to stuff my ears with cotton before I went any farther. Though I could still hear it, still feel its peculiar, penetrant vibration, the sound became muted when I had done this, and its influence was less powerful henceforth. There is little doubt that I owe my life to this simple and homely precaution.

The endless rows of columns grew dim for a while as the interior of a long, basaltic cavern; and then, some distance ahead, I perceived the glimmering of a soft light on the floor and pillars. The light soon became an over-flooding radiance, as if gigantic lamps were being lit in the temple's heart; and the vibrations of the hidden music pulsed more strongly in my nerves.

The hall ended in a chamber of immense, indefinite scope, whose walls and roof were doubtful with unremoving shadows. In the center, amid the pavement of mammoth blocks, there was a circular pit, above which seemed to float a fountain of flame that soared in one perpetual, slowly lengthening jet. This flame was the sole illumination, and also, was the

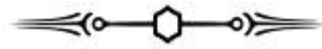
source of the wild, unearthly music. Even with my purposely deafened ears, I was wooed by the shrill and starry sweetness of its singing; and I felt the voluptuous lure and the high, vertiginous exaltation.

I knew immediately that the place was a shrine, and that the transdimensional beings who accompanied me were visiting pilgrims. There were scores of them — perhaps hundreds; but all were dwarfed in the cosmic immensity of that chamber. They were gathered before the flame in various attitudes of worship; they bowed their exotic heads, or made mysterious gestures or adoration with unhuman hands and members. And the voices of several, deep as booming drums, or sharp as the stridulation of giant insects, were audible amid the singing of the fountain.

Spellbound, I went forward and joined them. Enthralled by the music and by the vision of the soaring flame, I paid as little heed to my outlandish companions as they to me. The fountain rose and rose, until its light flickered on the limbs and features of throned, colossal, statues behind it — of heroes, gods or demons from the earlier cycles of alien time, staring in stone from a dusk of illimitable mystery.

The fire was green and dazzling, pure as the central flame of a star; it blinded me, and when I turned my eyes away, the air was filled with webs of intricate colour, with swiftly changing arabesques whose numberless, unwonted hues and patterns were such as no mundane eye had ever beheld. And I felt a stimulating warmth that filled my very marrow with intenser life...

III. The Lure of the Flame



The music mounted with the flame; and I understood, now, its recurrent ebb and flow. As I looked and listened, a mad thought was born in my mind — the thought of how marvelous and ecstatical it would be to run forward and leap headlong into the singing fire. The music seemed to tell me that I should find in that moment of flaring dissolution all the delight and triumph, all the splendor and exaltation it had promised from afar. It besought me; it pleaded with tones of supernal melody, and despite the wadding in my ears, the seduction was well-nigh irresistible.

However, it had not robbed me of all sanity. With a sudden start of terror, like one who has been tempted to fling himself from a high precipice, I drew back. Then I saw that the same dreadful impulse was shared by some of my companions. The two entities with scarlet wings, whom I have previously mentioned, were standing a little apart from the rest of us. Now, with a great fluttering, they rose and flew toward the flame like moths toward a candle. For a brief moment the light shone redly through their half-transparent wings, ere they disappeared in the leaping incandescence, which flared briefly and then burned as before.

Then, in rapid succession, a number of other beings, who represented the most divergent trends of biology, sprang forward and immolated themselves in the flame. There were creatures with translucent bodies, and some that shone with all the hues of the opal; there were winged colossi, and Titans who strode as with seven-league boots; and there was one being with useless, abortive wings, who crawled rather than ran, to seek the same glorious doom as the rest. But among them there were none of the city's people: these merely stood and looked on, impassive and statue-like as ever.

I saw that the fountain had now reached its greatest height, and was beginning to decline. It sank steadily, but slowly, to half its former elevation. During this interval, there were no more acts of self-sacrifice, and several of the beings beside me turned abruptly and went away, as if they had overcome the lethal spell.

One of the tall, armored entities, as he left, addressed me in words that were like clarion-notes, with unmistakable accents of warning. By a mighty effort of will, in a turmoil of conflicting emotions, I followed him. At every step, the madness and delirium of the music warred with my instincts of self-preservation. More than once, I started to go back. My homeward journey was blurred and doubtful as the wanderings of a man in opium-trance; and the music sang behind me, and told me of the rapture I had missed, of, the flaming dissolution whose brief instant was better than aeons of mortal life...

August 9th. — I have tried to go on with a new story, but have made no progress. Anything that I can imagine, or frame in language, seems flat and puerile beside the world of unsearchable mystery to which I have found admission. The temptation to return is more cogent than ever; the call of that remembered music is sweeter than the voice of a loved woman. And always I am tormented by the problem of it all, and tantalized by the little which I have perceived and understood.

What forces are these whose existence and working I have merely apprehended? Who are the inhabitants of the city? And who are the beings that visit the enshrined flame? What rumor or legend has drawn them from outland realms and ulterior planets to that place of inenarrable danger and destruction? And what is the fountain itself, what the secret of its lure and its deadly singing? These problems admit of infinite surmise, but no conceivable solution.

I am planning to go back once more... but not alone. Someone must go with me, this time, as a witness to the wonder and the peril. It is all too strange for credence: I must have human corroboration of what I have seen and felt and conjectured. Also, another might understand where I have failed to do more than apprehend.

Who shall I take? It will be necessary to invite someone here from the outer world — someone of high intellectual and aesthetic capacity. Shall I ask Philip Hastane, my fellow fiction-writer? He would be too busy, I fear. But there is the Californian artist, Felix Ebbonly, who has illustrated some of my fantastic novels...

Ebbonly would be the man to see and appreciate the new dimension, if he can come. With his bent for the bizarre and unearthly, the spectacle of that plain and city, the Babelian buildings and arcades, and the Temple of the Flame, will simply enthrall him. I shall write immediately to his San Francisco address.

August 12th. — Ebbonly is here: the mysterious hints in my letter, regarding some novel pictorial subjects along his own line, were too provocative for him to resist. Now, I have explained fully and given him a detailed account of my adventures. I can see that he is a little incredulous, for which I hardly blame him. But he will not remain incredulous for long, for tomorrow we shall visit together the City of the Singing Flame.

August 13th. — I must concentrate my disordered faculties, must choose my words and write with exceeding care. This will be the last entry in my journal, and the last writing I shall ever do. When I have finished, I shall wrap the journal up and address it to Philip Hastane, who can make such disposition of it as he sees fit.

I took Ebbonly into the other dimension today. He was impressed, even as I had been, by the two isolated boulders on Crater Ridge.

‘They look like the guttered ends of columns established by pre-human gods,’ he remarked. ‘I begin to believe you now.’

I told him to go first, and indicated the place where he should step. He obeyed without hesitation, and I had the singular experience of seeing a man melt into utter, instantaneous nothingness. One moment he was there — the next, there was only bare ground, and the far-off tamaracks whose view his body had obstructed. I followed, and found him standing, in speechless awe, on the violet grass.

‘This,’ he said at last, ‘is the sort of thing whose existence I have hitherto merely suspected, and have never been able to hint at in my most imaginative drawings.’

We spoke little as we followed the range of monolithic boulders toward the plain. Far in the distance, beyond those high and stately trees, with their sumptuous foliage, the golden-brown vapors had parted, showing vistas of an immense horizon; and past the horizon were range on range of gleaming orbs and fiery, flying motes in the depth of that amber heaven. It was as if the veil of another universe than ours had been drawn back.

We crossed the plain, and came at length within earshot of the siren music. I warned Ebbonly to stuff his ears with cotton-wadding, but he refused.

‘I don’t want to deaden any new sensation I may experience,’ he observed.

We entered the city. My companion was in a veritable rhapsody of artistic delight when he beheld the enormous buildings and the people. I could see, too, that the music had taken hold upon him: his look soon became fixed and dreamy as that of an opium-eater.

At first, he made many comments on the architecture and the various beings who passed us, and called my attention to details which I had not

perceived before. However, as we drew nearer the Temple of the Flame, his observational interest seemed to flag, and was replaced by more and more of an ecstatic inward absorption. His remarks became fewer and briefer, and he did not even seem to hear my questions. It was evident that the sound had wholly bemused and bewitched him.

Even as on my former visit, there were many pilgrims going toward the shrine — and few that were coming away from it. Most of them belonged to evolutionary types that I had seen before. Among those that were new to me, I recall one gorgeous creature with golden and cerulean wings like those of a giant lepidoptera, and scintillating, jewel-like eyes that must have been designed to mirror the glories of some Edenic world.

I felt, too, as before, the captious thralldom and bewitchment, the insidious, gradual perversion of thought and instinct, as if the music were working in my brain like a subtle alkaloid. Since I had taken my usual precaution, my subjection to the influence was less complete than that of Ebbonly; but, nevertheless, it was enough to make me forget a number of things — among them, the initial concern which I had felt when my companion refused to employ the same mode of protection as myself. I no longer thought of his danger, or my own, except as something very distant and immaterial.

The streets were like the prolonged and bewildering labyrinth of a nightmare. But the music led us forthrightly, and always there were other pilgrims. Like men in the grip of some powerful current, we were drawn to our destination. As we passed along the hall of gigantic columns and neared the abode of the fiery fountain, a sense of our peril quickened momentarily in my brain, and I sought to warn Ebbonly once more. But all my protests and remonstrances were futile: he was deaf as a machine, and wholly impervious to anything but the lethal music. His expression and movements

were those of a somnambulist. Even when I seized and shook him with such violence as I could muster, he remained oblivious of my presence.

The throng of worshippers was larger than upon my first visit. The jet of pure, incandescent flame was mounting steadily as we entered, and it sang with the pure ardor and ecstasy of a star alone in space. Again, with ineffable tones, it told me the rapture of a moth-like death in its lofty soaring, the exultation and triumph of a momentary union with its elemental essence.

The flame rose to its apex; and even for me, the mesmeric lure was well-nigh irresistible. Many of our companions succumbed, and the first to immolate himself was the giant lepidopterous being. Four others, of diverse evolutionary types, followed in appallingly swift succession.

In my own partial subjection to the music, my own effort to resist that deadly enslavement, I had almost forgotten the very presence of Ebbonly. It was too late for me to even think of stopping him, when he ran forward in a series of leaps that were both solemn and frenzied, like the beginnings of some sacerdotal dance, and hurled himself headlong into the flame. The fire enveloped him; it flared up for an instant with a more dazzling greenness, and that was all.

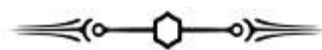
Slowly, as if from benumbed brain centers, a horror crept upon my conscious mind, and helped to annul the perilous mesmerism. I turned, while many others were following Ebbonly's example, and fled from the shrine and from the city. But somehow the horror diminished as I went; more and more, I found myself envying my companion's fate, and wondering as to the sensations he had felt in that moment of fiery dissolution...

Now, as I write this, I am wondering why I came back again to the human world. Words are futile to express what I have beheld and

experienced, and the change that has come upon me, beneath the play of incalculable forces in a world of which no other mortal is even cognisant. Literature is nothing more than a shadow. Life, with its drawn-out length of monotonous, reiterative days, is unreal and without meaning, now, in comparison with the splendid death which I might have had — the glorious doom which is still in store.

I have no longer any will to fight the ever-insistent music which I hear in memory. And there seems to be no reason at all why I should fight it... Tomorrow, I shall return to the city.

IV. The Third Venturer



Even when I, Philip Hastane, had read through the journal of my friend, Giles Angarth, so many times that I had almost learned it by heart, I was still doubtful as to whether the incidents related therein were fiction or verity. The transdimensional adventures of Angarth and Ebbonly; the City of the Flame, with its strange residents and pilgrims; the immolation of Ebbonly, and the hinted return of the narrator himself for a like purpose, in the last entry of the diary, were very much the sort of thing that Angarth might have imagined in one of the fantastic novels for which he had become so justly famous. Add to this the seemingly impossible and incredible nature of the whole tale, and my hesitancy in accepting it as veridical will easily be understood.

However, on the other hand, there was the unsolved and recalcitrant enigma offered by the disappearance of the two men. Both were well known, one as a writer, the other as an artist; both were in flourishing circumstances, with no serious cares or troubles; and their vanishment, all things considered, was difficult to explain on the ground of any motive less unusual or extraordinary than the one assigned in the journal. At first, as I have mentioned in my foreword to the diary, I thought the whole affair might well have been devised as a somewhat elaborate practical joke; but this theory became less and less tenable as weeks and months went by, and linked themselves slowly into a year, without the reappearance of the presumptive jokers.

Now, at last, I can testify to the truth of all that Angarth wrote — and more. For I, too, have been in Ydmos, the City of Singing Flame, and have known also the supernal glories and raptures of the Inner Dimension. And

of these I must tell, however falteringly and inadequately, with mere human words, before the vision fades. For these are things which neither I, nor any other, shall behold or experience again.

Ydmos itself is now a riven ruin; the Temple of the Flame has been blasted to its foundations in the basic rock, and the fountain of singing fire has been stricken at its source. The Inner Dimension has perished like a broken bubble, in the great war that was made upon Ydmos by the rulers of the Outer Lands...

After having finally laid down Angarth's journal, I was unable to forget the peculiar and tantalizing problems it raised. The vague, but infinitely suggestive vistas opened by the tale were such as to haunt my imagination recurrently with a hint of half-revealed mysteries. I was troubled by the possibility of some great and mystic meaning behind it all; some cosmic actuality of which the narrator had perceived merely the external veils and fringes. As time went on, I found myself pondering it perpetually, and becoming more and more possessed by an overwhelming wonder, and a sense of something which no mere action-weaver would have been likely to invent.

In the early summer of 1939, after finishing a new novel, I felt able for the first time to take the necessary leisure for the execution of a project that had often occurred to me. Putting all my affairs in order, and knitting all the loose ends of my literary labours and correspondence, in case I should not return, I left my home in Auburn, ostensibly for a week's vacation. Actually, I went to Summit, with the idea of investigating closely the milieu in which Angarth and Ebbonly had disappeared from human ken.

With strange emotions, I visited the forsaken cabin south of Crater Ridge, that had been occupied by Angarth, and saw the rough table of pine

boards upon which my friend had written his journal, and then left the sealed package containing it to be forwarded to me after his departure.

There was a weird and brooding loneliness about the place, as if the non-human infinitudes had already claimed it for their own. The unlocked door had sagged inward from the pressure of high-piled winter snows, and fir needles had sifted across the sill to strew the unswept floor. Somehow, I know not why, the bizarre narrative became more real and more credible to me, while I stood there, as if an occult intimation of all that had happened to its author still lingered around the cabin.

This mysterious intimation grew stronger when I came to visit Crater Ridge itself, and to search amid its miles of pseudo-volcanic rubble for the two boulders so explicitly described by Angarth as having a likeness to the pedestals of ruined columns. Following the northward path which he must have taken from his cabin, and trying to retrace his wanderings of the long, barren hill, I combed it thoroughly from end to end and from side to side, since he had not specified the location of the boulders. And after two mornings spent in this manner, without result, I was almost ready to abandon the quest and dismiss the queer, soapy, greenish-gray column-ends as one of Angarth's most provocative and deceptive fictions.

It must have been the formless, haunting intuition to which I have referred, that made me renew the search on the third morning. This time, after crossing and re-crossing the hill-top for an hour or more, and weaving tortuously among the cicada-haunted wild-currant bushes and sunflowers on the dusty slopes, I came at last to an open, circular, rock-surrounded space that was totally unfamiliar. I had somehow missed it in all my previous roamings. It was the place of which Angarth had told; and I saw, with an inexpressible thrill, the two rounded, worn-looking boulders that were situated in the center of the ring.

I believe that I trembled a little with excitement, as I went forward to inspect the curious stones. Bending over, but not daring to enter the bare, pebbly space between them, I touched one of them with my hand, and received a sensation of preternatural smoothness, together with a coolness that was inexplicable, considering that the boulders and the soil about them must have lain unshaded from the sultry August sun for many hours.

From that moment, I became fully persuaded that Angarth's account was no mere fable. Just why I should have felt so certain of this, I am powerless to say. But it seemed to me that I stood on the threshold of an ultramundane mystery, on the brink of uncharted gulfs. I looked about at the familiar Sierran valleys and mountains, wondering that they still preserved their wonted outlines, and were still unchanged by the contiguity of alien worlds, still untouched by the luminous glories of arcanic dimensions.

Convinced that I had indeed found the gateway between the worlds, I was prompted to strange reflections. What, and where, was this other sphere to which my friend had attained entrance? Was it near at hand, like a secret room in the structure of space? Or was it, in reality, millions or trillions of light-years away, by the reckoning of astronomic distance, in a planet of some ulterior galaxy?

After all, we know little or nothing of the actual nature of space; and, perhaps, in some way that we cannot imagine, the infinite is doubled upon itself in places, with dimensional folds and tucks, and short-cuts whereby the distance to Algenib or Aldebaran is but a step. Perhaps, also, there is more than one infinity. The spatial 'flaw' into which Angarth had fallen might well be a sort of super-dimension, abridging the cosmic intervals and connecting universe with universe.

However, because of this very certitude that I had found the inter-spheric portals, and could follow Angarth and Ebbonly if I so desired, I hesitated

before trying the experiment. I was mindful of the mystic danger and irrefragable lure that had overcome the others. I was consumed by imaginative curiosity, by an avid, well-nigh feverish longing to behold the wonders of this exotic realm; but I did not purpose to become a victim to the opiate power and fascination of the Singing Flame.

I stood for a long time, eyeing the odd boulders and the barren, pebble-littered spot that gave admission to the unknown. At length, I went away, deciding to defer my venture till the following morning. Visualizing the weird doom to which the others had gone so voluntarily, and even gladly, I must confess that I was afraid. On the other hand, I was drawn by the fateful allurements that lead an explorer into far places... and, perhaps, by something more than this.

I slept badly that night, with nerves and brain excited by formless, glowing premonitions, by intimations of half-conceived perils, and splendors and vastnesses. Early the next morning, while the sun was still hanging above the Nevada Mountains, I returned to Crater Ridge. I carried a strong hunting-knife and a Colt revolver, and wore a filled cartridge-belt, with a knapsack containing sandwiches and a thermos bottle of coffee.

Before starting, I had stuffed my ears tightly with cotton soaked in a new anaesthetic fluid, mild but efficacious, which would serve to deafen me completely for many hours. In this way, I felt that I should be immune to the demoralizing music of the fiery fountain. I peered about at the rugged landscape with its far-flung vistas, wondering if I should ever see it again. Then, resolutely, but with the eerie thrilling and sinking of one who throws himself from a high cliff into some bottomless chasm, I stepped forward into the space between the grayish-green boulders.

My sensations, generally speaking, were similar to those described by Angarth in his diary. Blackness and illimitable emptiness seemed to wrap

me round in a dizzy swirl as of rushing wind or milling water, and I went down and down in a spiral descent whose duration I have never been able to estimate. Intolerably stifled, and without even the power to gasp for breath, in the chill, airless vacuum that froze my very muscles and marrow, I felt that I should lose consciousness in another moment and descend into the greater gulf of death or oblivion.

Something seemed to arrest my fall, and I became aware that I was standing still, though I was troubled for some time by a queer doubt as to whether my position was vertical, horizontal or upside-down in relation to the solid substance that my feet had encountered. Then, the blackness lifted slowly like a dissolving cloud, and I saw the slope of violet grass, the rows of irregular monoliths running downward from where I stood, and the gray-green columns near at hand. Beyond was the titan, perpendicular city of red stone that was dominant above the high and multi-coloured vegetation of the plain.

It was all very much as Angarth had depicted it; but somehow, even then, I became aware of differences that were not immediately or clearly definable, of scenic details and atmospheric elements for which his account had not prepared me. And, at the moment I was too thoroughly disequibrated and overpowered by the vision of it all to even speculate concerning the character of these differences.

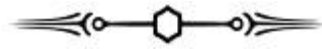
As I gazed at the city, with its crowding tiers of battlements and its multitude of overlooming spires I felt the invisible threads of a secret attraction, was seized by an imperative longing to know the mysteries hidden behind the massive walls and the myriad buildings. Then, a moment later, my gaze was drawn to the remote, opposite horizon of the plain, as if by some conflicting impulse whose nature and origin were undiscoverable.

It must have been because I had formed so clear and definite a picture of the scene from my friend's narrative, that I was surprised, and even a little disturbed as if by something wrong or irrelevant, when I saw in the far distance the shining towers of what seemed to be another city — a city of which Angarth had not written. The towers rose in serried lines, reaching for many miles in a curious arclike formation, and were sharply defined against a blackish mass of cloud that had reared behind them and was spreading out on the luminous, amber sky in sullen webs and sinister, crawling filaments.

Subtle disquietude and repulsion seemed to emanate from the far-off, glittering spires, even as attraction emanated from those of the nearer city. I saw them quiver and pulse with an evil light, like living and moving things, through what I assumed to be some refractive trick of the atmosphere. Then, for an instant, the black cloud behind them glowed with dull, angry crimson throughout its whole mass, and even its questing webs and tendrils were turned into lurid threads of fire.

The crimson faded, leaving the cloud inert and lumpish as before; but from many of the vanward towers, lines of red and violet flame had leaped, like out-thrust lances, at the bosom of the plain beneath them. They were held thus for at least a minute, moving slowly across a wide area, before they vanished. In the spaces between the towers, I now perceived a multitude of gleaming, restless particles, like armies of militant atoms, and wondered if perchance they were living things. If the idea had not appeared so fantastical, I could have sworn, even then, that the far city had already changed its position and was advancing toward the other on the plain.

V. The Striding Doom



Apart from the fulguration of the cloud, the flames that had sprung from the towers, and the quiverings which I deemed a refractive phenomenon, the whole landscape before and about me was unnaturally still. On the strange amber air, the Tyrian-tinted grasses, and the proud, opulent foliage of the unknown trees, where lay the dead calm that precedes the stupendous turmoil of typhonic storm or seismic cataclysm. The brooding sky was permeated with intuitions of cosmic menace, and weighed down by a dim, elemental despair.

Alarmed by this ominous atmosphere, I looked behind me at the two pillars which, according to Angarth, were the gateway of return to the human world. For an instant, I was tempted to go back. Then, I turned once more to the near-by city, and the feelings I have mentioned were lost in an oversurging awesomeness and wonder. I felt the thrill of a deep, supernal exaltation before the magnitude of the mighty buildings; a compelling sorcery was laid upon me by the very lines of their construction, by the harmonies of a solemn architectural music. I forgot my impulse to return to Crater Ridge, and started down the slope toward the city.

Soon the boughs of the purple and yellow forest arched above me like the altitudes of Titan-built aisles, with leaves that fretted the rich heaven in gorgeous arabesques. Beyond them, ever and anon, I caught glimpses of the piled ramparts of my destination; but looking back in the direction of that other city on the horizon, I found that its fulgurating towers were now lost to view.

I saw, however, that the masses of the great somber cloud were rising steadily on the sky, and once again they flared to a swart, malignant red, as

if with some unearthly form of sheet-lightning; and though I could hear nothing with my deadened ears, the ground beneath me trembled with long vibrations as of thunder. There was a queer quality in the vibrations, that seemed to tear my nerves and set my teeth on edge with its throbbing, lancinating discord, painful as broken glass or the torment of a tightened rack.

Like Angarth before me, I came to the paved Cyclopean highway. Following it, in the stillness after the unheard peals of thunder, I felt another and subtler vibration, which I knew to be that of the Singing Flame in the temple at the city's core. It seemed to soothe and exalt and bear me on, to erase with soft caresses the ache that still lingered in my nerves from the torturing pulsations of the thunder.

I met no one on the road, and was not passed by any of the trans-dimensional pilgrims such as had overtaken Angarth; and when the accumulated ramparts loomed above the highest trees I came forth from the wood in their very shadow, I saw that the great gate of the city was closed, leaving no crevice through which a pygmy like myself might obtain entrance.

Feeling a profound and peculiar discomfiture, such as one would experience in a dream that had gone wrong, I stared at the grim, unrelenting blackness of the gate, which seemed to be wrought from one enormous sheet of somber and lustreless metal. Then, I peered upward at the sheerness of the wall, which rose above me like an alpine cliff, and saw that the battlements were seemingly deserted. Was the city forsaken by its people, by the guardians of the Flame? Was it no longer open to the pilgrims who came from outlying lands to worship the Flame and immolate themselves?

With a curious reluctance, after lingering there for many minutes in a sort of stupor, I turned away to retrace my steps. In the interim of my

journey, the black cloud had drawn immeasurably nearer, and was now blotting out half the heaven with two portentous, wing-like formations. It was a sinister and terrible sight; and it lightened again with that ominous, wrathful flaming, with a detonation that beat upon my deaf ears like waves of disintegrative force, and seemed to lacerate the inmost fibers of my body.

I hesitated, fearing that the storm would burst upon me before I could reach the inter-dimensional portals, for I saw that I should be exposed to an elemental disturbance of unfamiliar character and supreme violence. Then, in mid-air before the imminent, ever-rising cloud, I perceived two flying creatures whom I can compare only to gigantic moths. With bright, luminous wings, upon the ebon forefront of the storm, they approached me in level but precipitate flight, and would have crashed headlong against the shut gate if they had not checked themselves with sudden, easy poise.

With hardly a flutter, they descended and paused on the ground beside me, supporting themselves on queer, delicate legs that branched at the knee-joints in floating antennae and waving tentacles. Their wings were sumptuously mottled webs of pearl and madder, opal and orange; their heads were circled by a series of convex and concave eyes, and fringed with coiling, horn-like organs from whose hollow ends there hung aerial filaments. I was startled and amazed by their aspect; but somehow, by an obscure telepathy I felt assured that their intentions toward me were friendly.

I knew that they wished to enter the city, and also that they understood my predicament. Nevertheless, I was not prepared for what happened. With movements of utmost celerity and grace, one of the giant, moth-like beings stationed himself at my right hand, and the other at my left. Then, before I could even suspect their intention, they enfolded my limbs and body with their long tentacles, wrapping me round and round as if with powerful

ropes; and carrying me between them as if my weight were a mere trifle, they rose in the air and soared at the mighty ramparts!

In that swift and effortless ascent, the wall seemed to flow downward beside and beneath us, like a wave of molten stone. Dizzily, I watched the falling away of the mammoth blocks in endless recession. Then, we were level with the broad ramparts, were flying across the unguarded parapets and over a canyon-like space, toward the immense rectangular buildings and numberless square towers.

We had hardly crossed the walls when a weird, flickering glow was cast on the edifices before us by another lightening of the great cloud. The moth-like beings paid no apparent heed, and flew steadily on into the city with their strange faces toward an unseen goal. But, turning my head to peer backward at the storm, I beheld an astounding and appalling spectacle. Beyond the city ramparts, as if wrought by black magic or the toil of genii, another city had reared, and its high towers were moving swiftly forward beneath the rubescent dome of the burning cloud!

A second glance, and I perceived that the towers were identical with those I had beheld afar on the plain. In the interim of my passage through the woods, they had traveled over an expanse of many miles, by means of some unknown motive-power, and had closed in on the City of the Flame. Looking more closely, to determine the manner of their locomotion, I saw that they were not mounted on wheels, but on short, massy legs like jointed columns of metal, that gave them the stride of ungainly colossi. There were six or more of these legs to each tower, and near the tops of the towers were rows of huge eye-like openings, from which issued the bolts of red and violet flame I have mentioned before.

The many-colored forest had been burned away by these flames in a league-wide swath of devastation, even to the walls, and there was nothing

but a stretch of black, vaporent desert between the mobile towers and the city. Then, even as I gazed, the long, leaping beams began to assail the craggy ramparts, and the topmost parapets were melting like lava beneath them. It was a scene of utmost terror and grandeur; but, a moment later, it was blotted from my vision by the buildings among which we had now plunged. The great lepidopterous creatures who bore me went on with the speed of eyrie-questing eagles. In the course of that flight, I was hardly capable of conscious thought or volition; I lived only in the breathless and giddy freedom of aerial movement, or dream-like levitation above the labyrinthine maze of stone immensitudes and marvels. I was without actual cognisance of much that I beheld in that stupendous Babel of architectural imageries, and only afterward, in the more tranquil light of recollection, could I give coherent form and meaning to many of my impressions.

My senses were stunned by the vastness and strangeness of it all; I realized but dimly the cataclysmic ruin that was being loosed upon the city behind us, and the doom from which we were fleeing. I knew that war was being made with unearthly weapons and engineering, by inimical powers that I could not imagine, for a purpose beyond my conception; but, to me, it all had the elemental confusion and vague, impersonal horror of some cosmic catastrophe.

We flew deeper and deeper into the city. Broad, platform roofs and terrace-like tiers of balconies flowed away beneath us, and the pavements raced like darkling streams at some enormous depth. Severe cubicular spires and square monoliths were all about and above us; and we saw on some of the roofs the dark, Atlantean people of the city, moving slowly and statuesquely, or standing in attitudes of cryptic resignation and despair, with their faces toward the flaming cloud, all were weaponless, and I saw no engineering anywhere such as might be used for purposes of military defense.

Swiftly as we flew, the climbing cloud was swifter, and the darkness of its intermittently glowing dome had overarched the town while its spidery filaments had meshed the further heavens and would soon attach themselves to the opposite horizon. The buildings darkened and lightened with the recurrent fulguration, and I felt in all my tissues the painful pulsing of the thunderous vibrations.

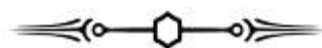
Dully and vaguely, I realized that the winged beings who carried me between then were pilgrims to the Temple of the Flame. More and more, I became aware of an influence that must have been that of the starry music emanating from the temple's heart. There were soft, soothing vibrations in the air, that seemed to absorb and nullify the tearing discords of the unheard thunder. I felt that we were entering a zone of mystic refuge, or sidereal and celestial security, and my troubled senses were both lulled and exalted.

The gorgeous wings of the giant lepidopters began to slant downward. Before and beneath us, at some distance, I perceived a mammoth pile which I knew at once for the Temple of the Flame. Down, still down we went, in the awesome, space of the surrounding square; and then I was borne in through the lofty, ever-open entrance, and along the high hall with its thousand columns. Pregnant with strange balsams, the dim, mysterious dusk enfolded us, and we seemed to be entering realms of pre-mundane antiquity and trans-stellar immensity; to be following a pillared cavern that led to the core of some ultimate star.

It seemed that we were the last and only pilgrims, and also that the temple was deserted by its guardians, for we met no one in the whole extent of that column-crowded gloom. After a while, the dusk began to lighten, and we plunged into a widening beam of radiance, and then into the vast central chamber in which soared the fountain of green fire.

I remember only the impression of shadowy, flickering space, of a vault that was lost in the azure of infinity, of colossal and Memnonian statues that looked down from Himalaya-like altitudes; and, above all, the dazzling jet of flame that aspired from a pit in the pavement and rose into the air like the visible rapture of gods. But all this I saw for an instant only. Then, I realized that the beings who bore me were flying straight toward the Flame on level wings, without the slightest pause or flutter of hesitation.

VI. The Inner Sphere



There was no room for fear, no time for alarm, in the dazed and chaotic turmoil of my sensations. I was stupefied by all that I had experienced, and moreover, the drug-like spell of the Flame was upon me, even though I could not hear its fatal singing. I believe that I struggled a little, by some sort of mechanical muscular revulsion, against the tentacular arms that were wound about me. But the lepidoptera gave no heed; it was plain that they were conscious of nothing but the mounting fire and its seductive music.

I remember, however, that there was no sensation of actual heat, such as might have been expected, when we neared the soaring column. Instead, I felt the most ineffable thrilling in all my fibers, as if I were being permeated by waves of celestial energy and demiurgic ecstasy. Then we entered the Flame...

Like Angarth before me, I had taken it for granted that the fate of all those who flung themselves into the Flame was an instant though blissful destruction. I expected to undergo a briefly flaring dissolution, followed by the nothingness of utter annihilation. The thing which really happened was beyond the boldest reach of speculative thought, and to give even a meager idea of my sensations would beggar the resources of language.

The Flame enfolded us like a green curtain, blotting from view the great chamber. Then it seemed to me that I was caught and carried to supercelestial heights, in an upward-rushing cataract of quintessential force and deific rapture, and an all-illuminating light. It seemed that I, and my companions, had achieved a god-like union with the Flame; that every atom of our bodies had undergone a transcendental expansion, and was winged with ethereal lightness.

It was as if we no longer existed, except as one divine, indivisible entity, soaring beyond the trammels of matter, beyond the limits of time and space, to attain undreamable shores. Unspeakable was the joy, and infinite the freedom of that ascent, in which we seemed to overpass the zenith of the highest star. Then, as if we had risen with the Flame to its culmination, had reached its very apex, we emerged and came to a pause.

My senses were faint with exaltation, my eyes blind with the glory of the fire; and the world on which I now gazed was a vast arabesque of unfamiliar forms and bewildering hues from another spectrum than the one to which our eyes are habituated. It swirled before my dizzy eyes like a labyrinth of gigantic jewels, with interweaving rays and tangled lustres, and only by slow degrees was I able to establish order and distinguish detail in the surging riot of my perceptions.

All about me were endless avenues of super-prismatic opal and jacinth; arches and pillars of ultra-violet gems, of transcendent sapphire, of unearthly ruby and amethyst, all suffused with a multi-tinted splendor. I appeared to be treading on jewels, and above me was a jeweled sky.

Presently, with recovered equilibrium, with eyes adjusted to a new range of cognition, I began to perceive the actual features of the landscape. With the two moth-like beings still beside me, I was standing on a million-flowered grass, among trees of a paradisaal vegetation, with fruit, foliage, blossoms and trunks whose very forms were beyond the conception of tridimensional life. The grace of their drooping boughs, of their fretted fronds, was inexpressible in terms of earthly line and contour, and they seemed to be wrought of pure, ethereal substance, half-translucent to the empyrean light, which accounted for the gem-like impression I had first received.

I breathed a nectar-laden air, and the ground beneath me was ineffably soft and resilient, as if it were composed of some higher form of matter than ours. My physical sensations were those of the utmost buoyancy and well-being, with no trace of fatigue or nervousness, such as might have been looked for after the unparalleled and marvellous events in which I had played a part. I felt no sense of mental dislocation or confusion; and, apart from my ability to recognize unknown colors and non-Euclidean forms, I began to experience a queer alteration and extension of tactility, through which it seemed that I was able to touch remote objects.

The radiant sky was filled with many-colored suns, like those that might shine on a world of some multiple solar system; but as I gazed, their glory became softer and dimmer, and the brilliant lustre of the trees and grass was gradually subdued, as if by encroaching twilight. I was beyond surprise, in the boundless marvel and mystery of it all, and nothing, perhaps, would have seemed incredible. But if anything could have amazed me or defied belief, it was the human face — the face of my vanished friend, Giles Angarth, which now emerged from among the waning jewels of the forest, followed by that of another man whom I recognized from photographs as Felix Ebbonly.

They came out from beneath the gorgeous boughs, and paused before me. Both were clad in lustrous fabrics, finer than Oriental silk, and of no earthly cut or pattern. Their look was both joyous and meditative, and their faces had taken on a hint of the same translucency that characterized the ethereal fruits and blossoms.

‘We have been looking for you,’ said Angarth. ‘It occurred to me that, after reading my journal, you might be tempted to try the same experiment, if only to make sure whether the account was truth or fiction. This is Felix Ebbonly, whom I believe you have never met.’

It surprised me when I found that I could hear his voice with perfect ease and clearness, and I wondered why the effect of the drug-soaked cotton should have died out so soon in my auditory nerves. Yet such details were trivial in the face of the astounding fact that I had found Angarth and Ebbonly; that they, as well as I, had survived the unearthly rapture of the Flame.

‘Where are we?’ I asked, after acknowledging his introduction. ‘I confess that I am totally at a loss to comprehend what has happened.’

‘We are now in what is called the Inner Dimension,’ explained Angarth. ‘It is a higher sphere of space and energy and matter than the one into which we were precipitated from Crater Ridge, and the only entrance is through the Singing Flame in the city of Ydmos. The Inner Dimension is born of the fiery fountain, and sustained by it; and those who fling themselves into the Flame are lifted thereby to this superior plane of vibration. For them, the Outer Worlds no longer exist. The nature of the Flame itself is not known, except that it is a fountain of pure energy springing from the central rock beneath Ydmos, and passing beyond mortal ken by virtue of its own ardency.’

He paused, and seemed to be peering attentively at the winged entities, who still lingered at my side. Then, he continued:

‘I haven’t been here long enough to learn very much, myself; but I have found out a few things, and Ebbonly and I have established a sort of telepathic communication with the other beings who have passed through the Flame. Many of them have no spoken language, nor organs of speech, and their very methods of thought are basically different from ours, because of their divergent lines of sense-development and the varying conditions of the worlds from which they come. But we are able to communicate a few images.

‘The persons who came with you are trying to tell me something,’ he went on. ‘You and they, it seems, are the last pilgrims who will enter Ydmos and attain the Inner Dimension. War is being made on the Flame and its guardians by the rulers of the Outer Lands, because so many of their people have obeyed the lure of the singing fountain and vanished into the higher sphere. Even now, their armies have closed in upon Ydmos and are blasting the city’s ramparts with the force-bolts of their moving towers.’

I told him what I had seen, comprehending, now, much that had been obscure heretofore. He listened gravely, and then said:

‘It has long been feared that such war would be made sooner or later. There are many legends in the Outer Lands concerning the Flame and the fate of those who succumb to its attraction, but the truth is not known, or is guessed only by a few. Many believe, as I did, that the end is destruction; and by some who suspect its existence, the Inner Dimension is hated as a thing that lures idle dreamers away from worldly reality. It is regarded as a lethal and pernicious chimera, as a mere poetic dream, or a sort of opium paradise.

‘There are a thousand things to tell you regarding the Inner Sphere, and the laws and conditions of being to which we are now subject after the revibration of all our component atoms in the Flame. But at present there is no time to speak further, since it is highly probable that we are all in grave danger — that the very existence of the Inner Dimension, as well as our own, is threatened by the inimical forces that are destroying Ydmos.

‘There are some who say that the Flame is impregnable, that its pure essence will defy the blasting of all inferior beams, and its source remain impenetrable to the lightnings of the Outer Lords. But most are fearful of disaster, and expect the failure of the fountain itself when Ydmos is riven to the central rock.

‘Because of this imminent peril, we must not tarry longer. There is a way which affords egress from the Inner Sphere to another and remoter Cosmos in a second infinity — a Cosmos unconceived by mundane astronomers, or by the astronomers of the worlds about Ydmos. The majority of the pilgrims, after a term of sojourn here, have gone on to the worlds of this other universe; and Ebbonly and I have waited only for your coming before following them. We must make haste, and delay no more, or doom will overtake us.’

Even as he spoke, the two moth-like entities, seeming to resign me to the care of my human friends, arose on the jewel-tinted air and sailed in long, level flight above the paradisal perspectives whose remoter avenues were lost in glory. Angarth and Ebbonly had now stationed themselves beside me, and one took me by the left arm, and the other by the right.

‘Try to imagine that you are flying,’ said Angarth. ‘In this sphere, levitation and flight are possible through willpower, and you will soon acquire the ability. We shall support and guide you, however, till you have grown accustomed to the new conditions and are independent of such help.’

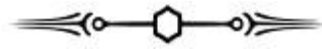
I obeyed his injunction, and formed a mental image of myself in the act of flying. I was amazed by the clearness and verisimilitude of the thought-picture, and still more by the fact that the picture was becoming an actuality! With little sense of effort, but with exactly the same feeling that characterizes a levitational dream, the three of us were soaring from the jeweled ground, slanting easily and swiftly upward through the glowing air.

Any attempt to describe the experience would be foredoomed to futility, since it seemed that a whole range of new senses had been opened up in me, together with corresponding thought-symbols for which there are no words in human speech. I was no longer Philip Hastane, but a larger, stronger and freer entity, differing as much from my former self as the personality

developed beneath the influence of hashish or kava would differ. The dominant feeling was one of immense joy and liberation, coupled with a sense of imperative haste, of the need to escape into other realms where the joy would endure eternal and unthreatened.

My visual perceptions, as we flew above the burning, lucent woods, were marked by intense, aesthetic pleasure. It was as far above the normal delight afforded by agreeable imagery as the forms and colours of this world were beyond the cognition of normal eyes. Every changing image was a source of veritable ecstasy; and the ecstasy mounted as the whole landscape began to brighten again and returned to the flashing, scintillating glory it had worn when I first beheld it.

VII. The Destruction of Ydmos



We soared at a lofty elevation, looking down on numberless miles of labyrinthine forest, on long, luxurious meadows, on voluptuously folded hills, on palatial buildings, and waters that were clear as the pristine lakes and rivers of Eden. It all seemed to quiver and pulsate like one living effulgent, ethereal entity, and waves of radiant rapture passed from sun to sun in the splendor-crowded heaven.

As we went on, I noticed again, after an interval, that partial dimming of the light; that somnolent, dreamy saddening of the colors, to be followed by another period of ecstatic brightening. The slow tidal rhythm of this process appeared to correspond to the rising and falling of the Flame, as Angarth had described it in his journal, and I suspected immediately that there was some connection. No sooner had I formulated this thought, than I became aware that Angarth was speaking. And yet, I am not sure whether he spoke, or whether his worded thought was perceptible to me through another sense than that of physical audition. At any rate, I was cognisant of his comment:

‘You are right. The waning and waxing of the fountain and its music is perceived in the Inner Dimension as a clouding and lightening of all visual images.’

Our flight began to swiften, and I realized that my companions were employing all their psychic energies in an effort to redouble our speed. The lands below us blurred to a cataract of streaming color, a sea of flowing luminosity; and we seemed to be hurtling onward like stars through the fiery air. The ecstasy of that endless soaring, the anxiety of that precipitate flight from an unknown doom, are incommunicable. But I shall never forget them, nor the state of ineffable communion and understanding that existed

between the three of us. The memory of it all is housed in the deepest, most abiding cells of my brain.

Others were flying beside and above and beneath us, now, in the fluctuant glory: pilgrims of hidden worlds and occult dimensions, proceeding as we ourselves toward that other Cosmos of which the Inner Sphere was the antechamber. These beings were strange and outré beyond belief, in their corporeal forms and attributes; and yet I took no thought of their strangeness, but felt toward them the same conviction of fraternity that I felt toward Angarth and Ebbonly.

As we still went on, it appeared to me that my two companions were telling me many things; communicating, by what means I am not sure, much that they had learned in their new existence. With a grave urgency as if, perhaps, the time for imparting this information might well be brief, ideas were expressed and conveyed which I could never have understood amid terrestrial circumstances. Things that were inconceivable in terms of the five senses, or in abstract symbols of philosophic or mathematic thought, were made plain to me as the letters of the alphabet.

Certain of these data, however, are roughly conveyable or suggestible in language. I was told of the gradual process of initiation into the life of the new dimension, of the powers gained by the neophyte during his term of adaptation, of the various recondite, aesthetic joys experienced through a mingling and multiplying of all the perceptions, of the control acquired over natural forces and over matter itself, so that raiment could be woven and buildings reared solely through an act of volition.

I learned, also, of the laws that would control our passage to the further Cosmos, and the fact that such passage was difficult and dangerous for anyone who had not lived a certain length of time in the Inner Dimension. Likewise, I was told that no one could return to our present plane from the

higher Cosmos, even as no one could go backward through the Flame into Ydmos.

Angarth and Ebbonly had dwelt long enough in the Inner Dimension, they said, to be eligible for entrance to the worlds beyond; and they thought that I, too, could escape through their assistance, even though I had not yet developed the faculty of spatial equilibrium necessary to sustain those who dared the interspheric path and its dreadful subjacent gulfs alone. There were boundless, unforeseeable realms, planet on planet, universe on universe, to which we might attain, and among whose prodigies and marvels we could dwell or wander indefinitely. In these worlds, our brains would be attuned to the comprehension of vaster and higher scientific laws, and states of entity beyond those of our present dimensional milieu.

I have no idea of the duration of our flight; since, like everything else, my sense of time was completely altered and transfigured. Relatively speaking, we may have gone on for hours; but it seemed to me that we had crossed an area of that supernal terrain for whose transit many years, or even centuries, might well have been required.

Even before we came within sight of it, a clear pictorial image of our destination had arisen in my mind, doubtless through some sort of thought-transference. I seemed to envision a stupendous mountain range, with alp on celestial alp, higher than the summer cumuli on Earth; and above them all the horn of an ultra-violet peak whose head was enfolded in a hueless and spiral cloud, touched with the sense of invisible chromatic overtones, that seemed to come down upon it from skies beyond the zenith. I knew that the way to the Outer Cosmos was hidden in the high cloud...

On and on we soared; and at length the mountain range appeared on the far horizon, and I saw the paramount peak of ultra-violet with its dazzling crown of cumulus. Nearer still we came, till the strange volutes of cloud

were almost above us, towering to the heavens and vanishing among the vari-colored suns; and we saw the gleaming forms of pilgrims who preceded us, as they entered the swirling folds. At this moment, the sky and the landscape had flamed again to their culminating brilliance; they burned with a thousand hues and lusters, so that the sudden, unlooked-for eclipse which now occurred was all the more complete and terrible. Before I was conscious of anything amiss, I seemed to hear a despairing cry from my friends, who must have felt the oncoming calamity through a subtler sense than any of which I was yet capable. Then, beyond the high and luminescent alp of our destination, I saw the mounting of a wall of darkness, dreadful and instant, positive and palpable, that rose everywhere and toppled like some Atlantean wave upon the irised suns and the fiery-colored vistas of the Inner Dimension.

We hung irresolute in the shadowed air, powerless and hopeless before the impending catastrophe, and saw that the darkness had surrounded the entire world and was rushing upon us from all sides. It ate the heavens, blotted the outer suns, and the vast perspectives over which we had flown appeared to shrink and shrivel like a fire-blackened paper. We seemed to wait alone, for one terrible instant, in a center of dwindling light on which the cyclonic forces of night and destruction were impinging with torrential rapidity.

The center shrank to a mere point — and then the darkness was upon us like an overwhelming maelstrom, like the falling and crashing of Cyclopean walls. I seemed to go down with the wreck of shattered worlds in a roaring sea of vortical space and force, to descend into some infra-stellar pit, some ultimate limbo to which the shards of forgotten suns and systems are flung. Then, after a measureless interval, there came the sensation of violent

impact, as if I had fallen among these shards, at the bottom of the universal night.

I struggled back to consciousness with slow, prodigious effort, as if I were crushed beneath some irremovable weight, beneath the lightless and inert débris of galaxies. It seemed to require the labors of a Titan to lift my lids, and my body and limbs were heavy, as if they had been turned to some denser element than human flesh, or had been subjected to the gravitation of a grosser planet than the Earth.

My mental processes were benumbed and painful, and confused to the last degree; but at length I realized that I was lying on a riven and tilted pavement, among gigantic blocks of fallen stone. Above me, the light of a livid heaven came down among over-turned and jagged walls that no longer supported their colossal dome. Close beside me, I saw a fuming pit from which a ragged rift extended through the floor, like the chasm wrought by an earthquake.

I could not recognize my surroundings for a time; but at last, with a toilsome groping of thought, I understood that I was lying in the ruined temple of Ydmos, and that the pit whose gray and acrid vapours rose beside me was that from which the fountain of singing flame had issued. It was a scene of stupendous havoc and devastation: the wrath that had been visited upon Ydmos had left no wall nor pylon of the temple standing. I stared at the blighted heavens from an architectural ruin in which the remains of On and Angkor would have been mere rubble-heaps.

With Herculean effort, I turned my head away from the smoking pit, whose thin, sluggish fumes curled upward in phantasmal coils where the green ardour of the Flame had soared and sung. Not until then did I perceive my companions. Angarth, still insensible, was lying near at hand, and just beyond him I saw the pale, contorted face of Ebbonly, whose lower

limbs and body were pinned down by the rough and broken pediment of a fallen pillar.

Striving, as in some eternal nightmare, to throw off the leaden-clinging weight of my inertia, and able to bestir myself only with the most painful slowness and laboriousness, I got to my feet and went over to Ebbonly. Angarth, I saw at a glance, was uninjured and would presently regain consciousness, but Ebbonly, crushed by the monolithic mass of stone, was dying swiftly, and even with the help of a dozen men I could not have released him from his imprisonment; nor could I have done anything to palliate his agony.

He tried to smile, with gallant and piteous courage, as I stooped above him.

‘It’s no use — I’m going in a moment,’ he whispered. ‘Good-bye, Hastane — and tell Angarth good-bye for me, too.’

His tortured lips relaxed, his eyelids dropped and his head fell back on the temple pavement. With an unreal dreamlike horror, almost without emotion, I saw that he was dead. The exhaustion that still beset me was too profound to permit of thought or feeling; it was like the first reaction that follows the awakening from a drug-debauch. My nerves were like burnt-out wires, my muscles dead and unresponsive as clay; my brain was ashen and gutted, as if a great fire had burned within it and gone out.

Somehow, after an interval of whose length my memory is uncertain, I managed to revive Angarth, and he sat up dully and dazedly. When I told him that Ebbonly was dead, my words appeared to make no impression upon him, and I wondered for a while if he understood. Finally, rousing himself a little with evident difficulty, he peered at the body of our friend, and seemed to realize in some measure the horror of the situation. But I

think he would have remained there for hours, or perhaps for all time, in his utter despair and lassitude, if I had not taken the initiative.

‘Come,’ I said, with an attempt at firmness. ‘We must get out of this.’

‘Where to?’ he queried, dully. ‘The Flame has failed at its source, and the Inner Dimension is no more. I wish I were dead, like Ebbonly — I might as well be, judging from the way I feel.’

‘We must find our way back to Crater Ridge,’ I said. ‘Surely we can do it, if the inter-dimensional portals have not been destroyed.’

Angarth did not seem to hear me, but he followed obediently when I took him by the arm and began to seek an exit from the temple’s heart, among the roofless halls and overturned columns...

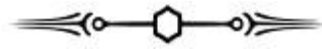
My recollections of our return are dim and confused, and full of the tediousness of some interminable delirium. I remember looking back at Ebbonly, lying white and still beneath the massive pillar that would serve as his eternal monument; and I recall the mountainous ruins of the city, in which it seemed that we were the only living beings. It was a wilderness of chaotic stone, of fused, obsidian-like blocks, where streams of molten lava still ran in the mighty chasms, or poured like torrents adown unfathomable pits that had opened in the ground. And I remember seeing, amid the wreckage, the charred bodies of those dark colossi who were the people of Ydmos and the warders of the Flame.

Like pygmies lost in some shattered fortalice of the giants, we stumbled onward, strangling in mephitic and metallic vapors, reeling with weariness, dizzy with the heat that emanated everywhere to surge upon us in buffeting waves. The way was blocked by overthrown buildings, by toppled towers and battlements, over which we climbed precariously and toilsomely; and often we were compelled to divagate from our direct course by enormous rifts that seemed to cleave the foundations of the world.

The moving towers of the wrathful Outer Lords had withdrawn; their armies had disappeared on the plain beyond Ydmos, when we staggered over the riven, shapeless and scoriac crags that had formed the city's ramparts. Before us was nothing but desolation — a fire-blackened and vapor-vaulted expanse in which no tree or blade of grass remained.

Across this waste we found our way to the slope of violet grass above the plain, which had lain beyond the path of the invader's bolts. There the guiding monoliths, reared by a people of whom we were never to learn even the name, still looked down upon the fuming desert and the mounded wrack of Ydmos. And there, at length, we came once more to the grayish-green columns that were the gateway between the worlds.

The Uncharted Isle



I DO NOT know how long I had been drifting in the boat. There are several days and nights that I remember only as alternate blanks of greyness and darkness; and, after these, there came a phantasmagoric eternity of delirium and an indeterminate lapse into pitch-black oblivion. The sea-water I had swallowed must have revived me; for when I came to myself, I was lying at the bottom of the boat with my head lifted a little in the stern, and six inches of brine lapping at my lips. I was gasping and strangling with the mouthfuls I had taken; the boat was tossing roughly, with more water coming over the sides at each toss; and I could hear the sound of breakers not far away.

I tried to sit up and succeeded, after a prodigious effort. My thoughts and sensations were curiously confused, and I found it difficult to orient myself in any manner. The physical sensation of extreme thirst was dominant over all else — my mouth was lined with running, throbbing fire — and I felt light-headed, and the rest of my body was strangely limp and hollow. It was hard to remember just what had happened; and, for a moment, I was not even puzzled by the fact that I was alone in the boat. But, even to my dazed, uncertain senses, the roar of those breakers had conveyed a distinct warning of peril; and, sitting up, I reached for the oars.

The oars were gone, but in my enfeebled state, it was not likely that I could have made much use of them anyway. I looked around, and saw that the boat was drifting rapidly in the wash of a shoreward current, between two low-lying darkish reefs half-hidden by flying veils of foam. A steep and barren cliff loomed before me; but, as the boat neared it, the cliff seemed to divide miraculously, revealing a narrow chasm through which I floated into

the mirror-like waters of a still lagoon. The passage from the rough sea without, to a realm of sheltered silence and seclusion, was no less abrupt than the transition of events and scenery which often occurs in a dream.

The lagoon was long and narrow, and ran sinuously away between level shores that were fringed with an ultra-tropical vegetation. There were many fern-palms, of a type I had never seen, and many stiff, gigantic cycads, and wide-leaved grasses taller than young trees. I wondered a little about them even then; though, as the boat drifted slowly toward the nearest beach, I was mainly preoccupied with the clarifying and assorting of my recollections. These gave me more trouble than one would think.

I must have been a trifle light-headed still; and the sea-water I had drunk couldn't have been very good for me either, even though it had helped to revive me. I remembered, of course, that I was Mark Irwin, first mate of the freighter Auckland, plying between Callao and Wellington; and I recalled only too well the night when Captain Melville had wrenched me bodily from my bunk, from the dreamless under-sea of a dog-tired slumber, shouting that the ship was on fire. I recalled the roaring hell of flame and smoke through which we had fought our way to the deck, to find that the vessel was already past retrieving, since the fire had reached the oil that formed part of her cargo; and then the swift launching of boats in the lurid glare of the conflagration. Half the crew had been caught in the blazing forecastle; and those of us who escaped were compelled to put off without water or provisions. We had rowed for days in a dead calm, without sighting any vessel, and were suffering the tortures of the damned, when a storm had arisen. In this storm, two of the boats were lost; and the third, which was manned by Captain Melville, the second mate, the boatswain, and myself, had survived. But sometime during the storm, or during the days and nights of delirium that followed, my companions must have gone overboard... This

much I recalled; but all of it was somehow unreal and remote, and seemed to pertain only to another person than the one who was floating shoreward on the waters of a still lagoon. I felt very dreamy and detached; and even my thirst didn't trouble me half as much now as it had on awakening.

The boat touched a beach of fine, pearly sand, before I began to wonder where I was and to speculate concerning the shores I had reached. I knew that we had been hundreds of miles southwest of Easter Island on the night of the fire, in a part of the Pacific where there is no other land; and certainly this couldn't be Easter Island. What, then, could it be? I realized with a sort of shock that I must have found something not on any charted course or geological map. Of course, it was an isle of some kind; but I could form no idea of its possible extent; and I had no way of deciding offhand whether it was peopled or unpeopled. Except for the lush vegetation, and a few queer-looking birds and butterflies, and some equally queer-looking fish in the lagoon, there was no visible life anywhere.

I got out of the boat, feeling very weak and wobbly in the hot white sunshine that poured down upon everything like a motionless universal cataract. My first thought was to find fresh water; and I plunged at random among the mighty fern-trees, parting their enormous leaves with extreme effort, and sometimes reeling against their boles to save myself from falling. Twenty or thirty paces, however, and then I came to a tiny rill that sprang in shattered crystal from a low ledge, to collect in a placid pool where ten-inch mosses and broad, anemone-like blossoms mirrored themselves. The water was cool and sweet: I drank profoundly, and felt the benison of its freshness permeate all my parched tissues.

Now I began to look around for some sort of edible fruit. Close to the stream, I found a shrub that was trailing its burden of salmon-yellow drupes on the giant mosses. I couldn't identify the fruit; but its aspect was

delicious, and I decided to take a chance. It was full of a sugary pulp; and strength returned to me even as I ate. My brain cleared, and I recovered many, if not all, of the faculties that had been in a state of partial abeyance.

I went back to the boat, and bailed out all the sea-water; then I tried to drag the boat as far up on the sand as I could, in case I might need it again at any future time. My strength was inadequate to the task; and still fearing that the tide might carry it away, I cut some of the high grasses with my clasp-knife and wove them into a long rope, with which I moored the boat to the nearest palm-tree.

Now, for the first time, I surveyed my situation with an analytic eye, and became aware of much that I had hitherto failed to observe or realize. A medley of queer impressions thronged upon me, some of which could not have arrived through the avenues of the known senses. To begin with, I saw more clearly the abnormal oddity of the plant-forms about me: they were not the palm-ferns, grasses and shrubs that are native to South sea islands: their leaves, their stems, their frondage, were mainly of uncouth archaic types, such as might have existed in former aeons, on the sea-lost littorals of Mu. They differed from anything I had seen in Australia or New Guinea, those asylums of a primeval flora; and, gazing upon them, I was overwhelmed with intimations of a dark and prehistoric antiquity. And the silence around me seemed to become the silence of dead ages and of things that have gone down beneath oblivion's tide. From that moment, I felt that there was something wrong about the island. But somehow I couldn't tell just what it was, or seize definitely upon everything that contributed to this impression.

Aside from the bizarre-looking vegetation, I noticed that there was a queerness about the very sun. It was too high in the heavens for any latitude to which I could conceivably have drifted; and it was too large anyway; and

the sky was unnaturally bright, with a dazzling incandescence. There was a spell of perpetual quietude upon the air, and never the slightest rippling of leaves or water; and the whole landscape hung before me like a monstrous vision of unbelievable realms apart from time and space. According to all the maps, that island couldn't exist, anyhow... More and more decisively I knew that there was something wrong: I felt an eerie confusion, a weird bewilderment, like one who has been cast away on the shores of an alien planet; and it seemed to me that I was separated from my former life, and from everything I had ever known, by an interval of distance more irreducible than all the blue leagues of sea and sky; that, like the island itself, I was lost to all possible reorientation. For a few instants, this feeling became a nervous panic, a paralyzing horror.

In an effort to overcome my agitation, I set off along the shore of the lagoon, pacing with feverish rapidity. It occurred to me that I might as well explore the island; and perhaps, after all, I might find some clue to the mystery, might stumble on something of explanation or reassurance.

After several serpent-like turns of the winding water, I reached the end of the lagoon. Here the country began to slope upward toward a high ridge, heavily wooded with the same vegetation I had already met, to which a long-leaved araucaria was now added. This ridge was apparently the crest of the island; and, after a half-hour of groping among the ferns, the stiff archaic shrubs and araucarias, I managed to surmount it.

Here, through a rift in the foliage, I looked down upon a scene no less incredible than unexpected. The further shore of the island was visible below me; and all along the curving beach of a land-locked harbor were the stone roofs and towers of a town! Even at that distance, I could see that the architecture was of an unfamiliar type; and I was not sure at first glance whether the buildings were ancient ruins or the homes of a living people.

Then, beyond the roofs, I saw that several strange-looking vessels were moored at a sort of mole, flaunting their orange sails in the sunlight.

My excitement was indescribable: at most (if the island were peopled at all) I had thought to find a few savage huts; and here below me were edifices that betokened a considerable degree of civilization! What they were, or who had builded them, were problems beyond surmise; but, as I hastened down the slope toward the harbor, a very human eagerness was mingled with the dumbfoundment and stupefaction I had been experiencing. At least, there were people on the island; and, at the realization of this, the horror that had been a part of my bewilderment was dissipated for the nonce.

When I drew nearer to the houses, I saw that they were indeed strange. But the strangeness was not wholly inherent in their architectural forms; nor was I able to trace its every source, or define it in any way, by word or image. The houses were built of a stone whose precise color I cannot recall, since it was neither brown nor red nor grey, but a hue that seemed to combine, yet differ from, all these; and I remember only that the general type of construction was low and square, with square towers. The strangeness lay in more than this — in the sense of a remote and stupefying antiquity that emanated from them like an odor: I knew at once that they were old as the uncouth primordial trees and grasses, and, like these, were parcel of a long-forgotten world.

Then I saw the people — those people before whom not only my ethnic knowledge, but my very reason, were to own themselves baffled. There were scores of them in sight among the buildings, and all of them appeared to be intensely preoccupied with something or other. At first I couldn't make out what they were doing, or trying to do; but plainly they were much in earnest about it. Some were looking at the sea or the sun, and then at long

scrolls of a paper-like material which they held in their hands; and many were grouped on a stone platform around a large, intricate metal apparatus resembling an armillary. All of these people were dressed in tunic-like garments of unusual amber and azure and Tyrian shades, cut in a fashion that was unfamiliar to history; and when I came close, I saw that their faces were broad and flat, with a vague fore-omening of the Mongolian in their oblique eyes. But, in an unspecifiable way, the character of their features was not that of any race that has seen the sun for a million years; and the low, liquid, many-vowelled words which they spoke to each other were not denotive of any recorded language.

None of them appeared to notice me; and I went up to a group of three who were studying one of the long scrolls I have mentioned, and addressed them. For all answer, they bent closer above the scroll; and even when I plucked one of them by the sleeve, it was evident that he did not observe me. Much amazed, I peered into their faces, and was struck by the mingling of supreme perplexity and monomaniacal intentness which their expression displayed. There was much of the madman, and more of the scientist, absorbed in some irresolvable problem. Their eyes were fixed and fiery, their lips moved and mumbled in a fever of perpetual disquiet; and, following their gaze, I saw that the thing they were studying was a sort of chart or map, whose yellowing paper and faded inks were manifestly of past ages. The continents and seas and isles on this map were not those of the world I knew; and their names were written in heteroclitic runes of a lost alphabet. There was one immense continent in particular, with a tiny isle close to its southern shore; and ever and anon, one of the beings who pored above the map would touch this isle with his fingertip, and then would stare toward the empty horizon, as if he were seeking to recover a vanished shoreline. I received a distinct impression that these people were as irretrievably lost as

I myself; that they too were disturbed and baffled by a situation not to be solved or redeemed.

I went on toward the stone platform, which stood in a broad open space among the foremost houses. It was perhaps ten feet high, and access to it was given by a flight of winding steps. I mounted the steps, and tried to accost the people were crowding about the armillary-like instrument. But they too were utterly oblivious of me, and intent upon the observations they were making. Some of them were turning the great celestial sphere; some were consulting various geographical and celestial maps; and, from my nautical knowledge, I could see that certain of their companions were taking the height of the sun with a kind of astrolabe. All of them wore the same look of perplexity and savant-like preoccupation which I had observed in the others.

Seeing that my efforts to attract their attention were fruitless, I left the platform and wandered along the streets toward the harbor. The strangeness and inexplicability of it all were too much for me: more and more, I felt that I was being alienated from the realms of all rational experience or conjecture; that I had fallen into some unearthly limbo of confoundment and unreason, into the cul-de-sac of an ultra-terrestrial dimension. These beings were so palpably astray and bewildered; it was so obvious that they knew as well as I that there was something wrong with the geography, and perhaps with the chronology, of their island.

I spent the rest of the day roaming around; but nowhere could I find anyone who was able to perceive my presence; and nowhere was there anything to reassure me, or resolve my ever-growing confusion of mind and spirit. Everywhere there were men, and also women; and though comparatively few of them were grey and wrinkled, they all conveyed to my apprehension a feeling of immemorial eld, of years and cycles beyond

all record or computation. And all were troubled, all were feverously intent, and were perusing maps or reading ancient pells and volumes, or staring at the sea and sky, or studying the brazen tablets of astronomical parapegms along the streets, as if by so doing they could somehow find the flaw in their reckonings. There were men and women of mature years, and some with the fresh, unlined visages of youth; but in all the place I saw but one child; and the face of the child was no less perplexed and troubled than those of its elders. If anyone ate or drank or carried on the normal occupations of life, it was not done within my scope of vision; and I conceived the idea that they had lived in this manner, obsessed with the same problem, through a period of time which would have been practically eternal in any other world than theirs.

I came to a large building, whose open door was dark with the shadows of the interior. Peering in, I found that it was a temple; for across the deserted twilight, heavy with the stale fumes of burnt-out incense, the slant eyes of a baleful and monstrous image glared upon me. The thing was seemingly of stone or wood, with gorilla-like arms and the malignant features of a subhuman race. From what little I could see in the gloom, it was not pleasant to look upon; and I left the temple, and continued my perambulations.

Now I came to the waterfront, where the vessels with orange sails were moored at a stone mole. There were five or six of them in all: they were small galleys, with single banks of oars, and figureheads of metal that were graven with the likeness of primordial gods. They were indescribably worn by the waves of untold years; their sails were rotting rags; and no less than all else on the island, they bore the imprint of a dread antiquity. It was easy to believe that their grotesquely carven prows had touched the aeon-sunken wharves of Lemuria.

I returned to the town; and once again I sought to make my presence known to the inhabitants, but all in vain. And after a while, as I trudged from street to street, the sun went down behind the island, and the stars came swiftly out in a heaven of purpureal velvet. The stars were large and lustrous and were innumerable thick: with the eye of a practiced mariner, I studied them eagerly; but I could not trace the wonted constellations, though here and there I thought that I perceived a distortion or elongation of some familiar grouping. All was hopelessly askew, and disorder crept into my very brain, as I tried once more to orient myself, and noticed that the inhabitants of the town were still busied with a similar endeavor...

I have no way of computing the length of my sojourn on the island. Time didn't seem to have any proper meaning there; and, even if it had, my mental state was not one to admit of precise reckoning. It was all so impossible and unreal, so much like an absurd and troublesome hallucination; and half the time, I thought that it was merely a continuation of my delirium — that probably I was still drifting in the boat. After all, this was the most reasonable supposition; and I don't wonder that those who have heard my story refuse to entertain any other. I'd agree with them, if it weren't for one or two quite material details...

The manner in which I lived is pretty vague to me, also. I remember sleeping under the stars, outside the town; I remember eating and drinking, and watching those people day after day, as they pursued their hopeless calculations. Sometimes I went into the houses and helped myself to food; and once or twice, if I remember rightly, I slept on a couch in one of them, without being disputed or heeded by the owners. There was nothing that could break the spell of their obsession or force them to notice me; and I soon gave up the attempt. And it seemed to me, as time went on, that I

myself was no less unreal, no less doubtful and insubstantial, than their disregard would appear to indicate.

In the midst of my bewilderment, however, I found myself wondering if it would be possible to get away from the island. I remembered my boat, and remembered also that I had no oars. And forthwith I made tentative preparations for departure. In broad daylight, before the eyes of the townspeople, I took two oars from one of the galleys in the harbor, and carried them across the ridge to where my boat was hidden. The oars were very heavy, their blades were broad as fans, and their handles were fretted with hieroglyphs of silver. Also, I appropriated from one of the houses two earthen jars, painted with barbaric figures, and bore them away to the lagoon, intending to fill them with fresh water when I left. And also I collected a supply of food. But somehow the brain-muddling mystery of it all had paralyzed my initiative; and even when everything was ready, I delayed my departure. I felt, too, that the inhabitants must have tried innumerable times to get away in their galleys, and had always failed. And so I lingered on, like a man in the grip of some ridiculous nightmare.

One evening, when those distorted stars had all come out, I became aware that unusual things were going on. The people were no longer standing about in groups, with their customary porings and discussions, but were all hastening toward the temple-like edifice. I followed them, and peered in at the door.

The place was lit with flaring torches that flung demoniac shadows on the crowd and on the idol before whom they were bowing. Perfumes were burnt, and chants were sung in the myriad-vowelled language with which my ear had become familiarized. They were invoking that frightful image with gorilla-like arms and half-human, half-animal face; and it was not hard for me to surmise the purpose of the invocation. Then the voices died to a

sorrowful whisper, the smoke of the censers thinned, and the little child I had once seen was thrust forward in a vacant space between the congregation and the idol.

I had thought, of course, that the god was of wood or stone; but now, in a flash of terror and consternation, I wondered if I had been mistaken. For the oblique eyes opened more widely, and glowered upon the child, and the long arms, ending in knife-taloned fingers, lifted slowly and reached forward. And arrow-sharp fangs were displayed in the bestial grin of the leaning face. The child was still as a bird beneath the hypnotic eyes of a serpent; and there was no movement, and no longer even a whisper, from the waiting throng...

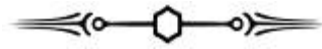
I cannot recall what happened then: whenever I try to recall it, there is a cloud of horror and darkness in my brain. I must have left the temple and fled across the island by starlight; but of this, too, I remember nothing. My first recollection is of rowing seaward through the narrow chasm by which I had entered the lagoon, and of trying to steer a course by the wried and twisted constellations. After that, there were days and days on a bland, unrippled sea, beneath a heaven of dazzling incandescence; and more nights below the crazy stars; till the days and nights became an eternity of tortured weariness and my food and water were all consumed; and hunger and thirst and a feverous calenture with tossing, seething hallucinations, were all that I knew.

One night, I came to myself for a little while, and lay staring up at the sky. And once more the stars were those of the rightful heavens; and I gave thanks to God for my sight of the Southern Cross, ere I slid back into coma and delirium. And when I recovered consciousness again, I was lying in a ship's cabin, and the ship's doctor was bending over me.

They were all very kind to me on that ship. But when I tried to tell them my tale, they smiled pityingly; and after a few attempts, I learned to keep my silence. They were very curious about the two oars with silver-fretted handles, and the painted jars which they found with me in the boat; but they were all too frank in refusing to accept my explanation. No such island and no such people could possibly exist, they said: it was contrary to all the maps that had ever been made, and gave the direct lie to all the ethnologists and geographers.

Often I wonder about it, myself, for there are so many things I can't explain. Is there a part of the Pacific that extends beyond time and space — an oceanic limbo into which, by some unknowable cataclysm, that island passed in a bygone period, even as Lemuria sank beneath the wave? And if so, by what abrogation of dimensional laws was I enabled to reach the island and depart from it? These things are beyond speculation. But often in my dream, I see again the incognizably distorted stars, and share the confusion and bafflement of a lost people, as they pore above their useless charts, and take the altitude of a deviated sun.

The Second Interment



“WELL,” SAID GUY Magbane, “I notice that you’re still alive.” His curtain-shadowed lips, as they shaped the words, took on a thin, ambiguous curve that might have been either smile or sneer. He came forward, peering a little obliquely at the sick man, and held out the glass of garnet-colored medicine.

Sir Uther Magbane, sitting amid the heavy pillows like a death’s-head with tawny hair and blue eyes, made no answer and appeared to hesitate before accepting the glass. A dark, formless terror seemed to float upward in his pale gaze, like a drowned object that rises slowly in some autumnal weir. Finally he took the glass and drained its contents with a convulsive gulp, as if the act of swallowing were difficult.

“I’m pretty sick this time, Guy,” he said, in a voice that some inner constriction had rendered harshly guttural and toneless. “But the worst fear is that I may not be sick enough — that the thing may happen again as it did before. My God! I can’t think of anything else — can’t imagine anything else but the black, suffocating agony, the blind, intolerable, stifling horror of it. Promise me — promise me again, Guy, that you’ll defer my burial for at least a fortnight, for a month; and swear that when you do put me away you’ll make sure that the push-button and electric wiring in my casket are in good order. Merciful God, supposing I should wake up in the tomb — and find that the alarm didn’t work!”

“Don’t worry; I’ll attend to all that.” The tone was soothing, a little contemptuous and, to the listener, touched with a sinister meaning. Guy Magbane turned to leave the room, and did not see that the floating fear in

his brother's gaze had become for the moment a palpable, recognizable thing. He added over his shoulder, negligently and without looking back:

“That idea has grown to be a regular obsession with you. Just because the thing occurred once doesn't mean that it will ever occur again. If you die this time, you'll stay dead, in all likelihood. There won't be any more mistakes about it.” With this equivocal and dubious reassurance, he went out and closed the door behind him.

Sir Uther Magbane leaned back among the pillows and stared at the somber oaken wainscoting. He felt — as he had felt ever since the beginning of his present illness — that the room was too cramped and narrow; that the walls were always threatening to close in upon him, the roof to descend above him, like the sides and lid of a coffin. He could never seem to draw a full breath. All he could do was to lie there, alone with his ghastly fear, his hideous memories and his even more hideous apprehensions. The visits of his younger brother, Guy, for some time past, had served merely to strengthen his feeling of sepulchral oppression — for Guy was now part of the fear.

He had always been afraid of death, even in his boyhood — that time when the specter should normally be dim and far away, if perceived at all. It had begun with the early death of his mother: ever since that black bereavement, a hovering vulturine shadow had seemed to taint and darken the things that were unspoiled for others. His imagination, morbidly acute, sick with suspicion of life itself, had seen everywhere the indwelling skeleton, the flower-shrouded corpse. The kisses of young love were flavored with mortality. The very sap of things was touched with putrefaction.

With heartfelt shudders, as he matured, he had nourished his charnel fancy on all that was macabre in art and literature. Like a seer who gazes

into a black crystal, he foresaw with harrowing minuteness the physical and mental agonies of dissolution; he previsioned the activities of decay, the slow toil of the mordant worm, as clearly as if he had descended into the tomb's loathsome oblivion. But he had not imagined or feared the most poignant horror of all — that of premature burial — until he had himself experienced it.

The thing had come without warning, just after his cession to the estate, and his engagement to Alice Margreave, in whose love he had begun to forget a little his boyhood terrors. It was as if the haunting spectre had retired, only to strike in a more abhorrent and appalling shape.

Lying there now, the memory seemed to stop his very heart, to throttle his breathing, as it always did. Again, with hallucinatory distinctness, he recalled the first gradual attack of his mysterious malady. He recalled the beginning of his syncope, the lightless gulf into which he had gone down, by timeless degrees, as if through infinite empty space. Somewhere in that gulf, he had found oblivion — the black instant that might have been hours or ages — from which he had awakened in darkness, had tried to sit up, and had bruised his face against an adamantine obstruction that seemed to be only a few inches above him. He had struck out, blindly, in mad, insensate panic, trying to thresh about with hands and feet, and had met on all sides a hard, unyielding surface, more terrifying, because of its inexplicable *nearness*, than the walls of some nighted oubliette.

There was a period of nightmare confusion — and then he knew what had happened. By some ghastly mistake, he had been placed, still alive, in a casket; and the casket was in the old vaults of his family, below the chapel floor. He began to scream then, and his screams, with the dull, muffled repercussion of some underground explosion, were hurled back upon him

appallingly in the narrow space. Already the air seemed to stifle him, thick with mortuary odors of wood and cloth.

Hysteria seized him, and he went quite mad, hurling himself against the lid in what seemed an eternity of cramped, hopeless struggle. He did not hear the sound of footsteps that came hurrying to his aid, and the blows of men with chisels and hammers on the heavy lid which mingled indistinguishably with his own cries and clamorings. Even when the lid was wrenched loose, he had become quite delirious with the horror of it all, and had fought against his rescuers, as if they too were part of the suffocating, constrictive nightmare.

Never was he able to believe that his experience had been a matter of a few minutes only — that he had awakened just after the depositing of the coffin in the vault and before the actual lowering of the slab and the departure of the pall bearers, whose horrified attention he had attracted by the muted sound of his cries and struggles. It seemed to him that he must have fought there for immeasurable cycles.

The shock had left him with shattered nerves that trembled uncontrollably; nerves that found a secret terror, a funereal alarm, in the most innocent, unshadowed things. Three years had gone by since then, but at no time had he been able to master his grisly obsession, to climb from the night-bound pit of his demoralization. His old fear of death was complicated by a new dread: that his illness, recurring, as it was likely to do, would again take the deceptive semblance of death, and again he would awaken in the tomb. With the ceaseless apprehension of a hypochondriac, he watched for the first repetition of the malady's preliminary symptoms, and felt himself irretrievably doomed from their beginning.

His fear had poisoned everything; had even parted him from Alice Margreave. There had been no formal breaking of the engagement, merely a

tacit falling apart of the self-preoccupied, self-tortured neurotic and the girl whose love had soon turned, perforce, to a bewildered and horror-mingled pity for him.

After that, he had abandoned himself more fully, if possible, to his monomania. He had read everything he could find on the subject of premature interment, he had collected clippings that told of known cases: people who had been rescued in time — or whose reanimation had been detected too late, perhaps had been surmised only from some change or contortion of posture noticed after many years in the removal of the body to a new burial place. Impelled by a shivering fascination, he delved without restraint in the full ghastliness of the abominable theme. And always, in the fate of others, he saw his own fate; and their sufferings, by some vicarious visitation, became his.

Fatally convinced that the insufferable horror would recur, he had made elaborate precautions, equipping the casket in which he was to be buried with an electrical device that would summon help. The least pressure of a button, within easy reach of his right hand, would set an alarm gong to ringing in the family chapel above, together with a second gong in the nearby manor house.

Even this, however, did little to assuage his fears. He was haunted by the idea that the push button might fail to work, or that no one would hear it, or that his rescuers might arrive too late, when he had undergone the full agonies of asphyxiation.

These apprehensions, growing more dolorous and more tyrannous daily, had accompanied the first stages of his second illness. Then, by vacillating degrees, he had begun to doubt his brother, to suspect that Guy, being next in the line of inheritance, might wish for his demise and have an interest in its consummation. Guy had always been a cynical, cold-blooded sort; and

his half-concealed contempt and scant sympathy for Uther Magbane's obsession was readily translated into darker terms by a sick fantasy. Gradually, as he grew weaker, the invalid had come to fear that his brother would deliberately hasten the burial — might even disconnect the device for summoning aid, whose care had been confided to him.

Now, after Guy had gone out, the certainty of such treachery, like a black and noxious blossom, leaped full-grown in Sir Uther Magbane's mind. Swept by a cold, devastating panic, he resolved that he would speak, at the first opportunity, to someone else — would confide secretly to another person than Guy the responsibility of seeing that the electrical alarm was kept in good working order.

Hours went by in a shrouded file as he lay there with his poisonous and sepulchral thoughts. It was afternoon, and the sloping sun should have shone now through the leaded panes, but the yew-fringed sky beyond the window seemed to be overcast, and there was only a sodden glimmering. Twilight began to weave a gray web in the room; and Magbane remembered that it was almost time for the doctor to pay him his evening visit.

Could he dare confide in the doctor, he wondered? He did not know the man very well. The family physician had died some time ago, and this new doctor had been called in by Guy. Sir Uther had never cared much for his manner, which was both brisk and saturnine. He might be in league with Guy, might have an understanding as to the way in which the elder brother could be so conveniently disposed of, and his demise made certain. No, he could not speak to the doctor.

Who was there to help him, anyway? He had never made many friends, and even these seemed to have deserted him. The manor house was in a lonely part of the country, and everything would facilitate the treachery that he apprehended. God! he was being smothered — buried alive!...

Someone opened the door quietly and came toward him. He felt so hopeless and helpless that he did not even try to turn. Presently the visitor stood before him, and he saw that it was Holton, the aged family butler, who had served three generations of the Magbanes. Probably he could trust Holton, and he would speak about the matter now.

He framed the words with which he would address the butler, and was horrified when his tongue and his lips refused to obey him. He had not noticed anything wrong heretofore: his brain and his senses had been preternaturally clear. But now an icy paralysis appeared to have seized his organs of articulation.

He tried to lift his pale, clawlike hand and beckon to Holton, but the hand lay moveless on the counterpane, in spite of the agonized and herculean effort of will which he exerted. Fully conscious, but powerless to stir by so much as the shifting of a finger or the drooping of an eyelid, he could only lie and watch the dawning concern in the old butler's rheumy eyes.

Holton came nearer, reaching out his tremulous hand. Magbane saw the hand approaching him, saw it hover above his body, and descend toward his heart, just below the direct focus of his vision. It seemed never to reach him — at least there was no sensation of contact. The room was dimming rapidly — strange that the darkness should have come so soon — and a faintness was creeping on all his senses, like an insidious mist.

With a start of familiar terror, and a feeling of some intolerable repetition, of doing what he had once before done under circumstances of dire fright, he felt that he was going down into a night-black abyss. Holton's face was fading to a remote star, was receding with awful velocity above unscalable pits at whose bottom nameless, inexorable doom awaited Magbane: a doom to which he had gone at some previous time, and which

he had been predestined to meet from the beginning of cycles. Down, forever down he went; the star disappeared; there was no light anywhere — and his syncope was complete.

Magbane's reviving consciousness took the form of a fantastic dream. In this dream, he remembered his descent into the gulf; and he thought that the descent had been prolonged, after a dim interval, by some animate, malignant agency. Great demoniac hands had seemed to grasp him in the nadir-founded gloom, had lifted him, had carried him down immeasurable flights of inframundane stairs and along corridors that lay deeper than hell itself.

There was night everywhere. He could not see the forms of those who bore him, supporting him at feet and head, but he could hear their implacable, unceasing steps, echoing with hollow and sepulchral thunder in the black subterrane; and he could sense the funereal towering of their shapes, oppressing him from about and above in some ultra-tactual fashion, such as is possible only in dreams.

Somewhere in that nether night they laid him down, they left him and went away. In his dream he heard the departing nimble of their footsteps, with leaden reverberations, endless and ominous, through all the stairs and corridors by which they had come with their human burden. At last there was a prolonged clangor as of closing doors, somewhere in the upper profound, a clangor fraught with unutterable despair, like the knell of Titans. After its echoes had died away, the despair seemed to remain, stagnant and soundless, dwelling tyrannically, illimitably, in all the recesses of this sepulchral underworld.

Silence, dank, stifling, eonian silence prevailed, as if the whole universe had died, had gone down to some infra-spatial burial. Magbane could

neither move nor breathe; and he felt, by no physical sense, an infinity of dead things about him, lying hopeless of resurrection, like himself.

Then, within the dream, by no perceptible transition, another dream was intercalated. Magbane forgot the horror and hopelessness of his descent, as a new-born child might forget some former death. He thought that he was standing in a place of soft sunlight and blithe, many-tinted flowers. An April turf was deep and resilient beneath him; the heavens were those of some vernal paradise; and he was not alone in this Eden, for Alice Margreave, his former fiancée, stood lovely and smiling amid the nearer blossoms.

He stepped toward her, filled with ineffable happiness — and in the sward at his feet a black pit, shaped like the grave, opened and widened and deepened with awful rapidity. Powerless to avert his doom, he went down into the pit, falling, falling interminably; and the darkness closed above him, swooping from all sides on a dim pin-point of light which was all that remained of the April heavens. The light expired, and Magbane was lying once more among dead things, in vaults beneath the universe.

By slow, incalculably doubtful graduations his dream began to merge into reality. At first, there had been no sense of time; only an ebon stagnation, in which eons and minutes were equally drowned. Then — through what channel of sense he knew not — there returned to Magbane the awareness of duration. The awareness sharpened, and he thought that he heard, at long, regular intervals, a remote and muffled sound. Insufferable doubt and bewilderment, associated with some horror which he could not recall, awoke and brooded noxiously in his dark mind.

Now he became aware of bodily discomfort. A dank chill, beginning as if in his very brain, crept downward through his body and limbs, till it reached his extremities and left them tingling. He felt, too, that he was intolerably cramped, was lying in some stiff, straitened position. With mounting terror,

for which as yet he could find no name, he heard the remote muffled sound draw closer, till it was no longer a sound, but the palpable hammering of his heart against his side. With this clarifying of his sense-perceptions, he knew abruptly, as in a flash of black lightning, the thing of which he was afraid.

The terrible knowledge went through him in a lethal shock, leaving him frozen. It was like a tetanic rigor, oppressing all his members, constricting his throat and heart as with iron bands; inhibiting his breath, crushing him like some material incubus. He dared not, could not move to verify his fear.

Utterly unmanned by a conviction of atrocious doom, he fought to regain some nominal degree of composure. He must not give way to the horror, or he would go mad. Perhaps it was only a dream after all; perhaps he was lying awake in his own bed, in darkness, and if he reached out his hand, he would encounter free space — not the hideous nearness of a coffin lid.

In a sick vertigo of irresolution, he tried to summon courage and volition for the test. His sense of smell, awakening now, tended to confirm his despair; for there was a musty closeness, a dismal, sodden reek of wood and cloth — even as once before. It seemed to grow heavier momentarily with confined impurities.

At first, he thought that he could not move his hand — that the strange paralysis of his malady had not yet left him. With the dread laboriousness of nightmare, he lifted it slowly, tediously, as if overcoming the obstruction of a viscid medium. When, finally, a few inches away, it met the cold, straight surface he had apprehended, he felt the iron tightening of his despair, but was not surprised. There had been no real room for hope: the thing was happening again, just as it had been ordained to happen. Every step he had taken since birth, every motion, every breath, every struggle — had led only to this.

Mad thoughts were milling in his brain, like crowded maggots in a corpse. Old memories and present fears were mingled in strange confusion, steeped with the same charnel blackness. He recalled, in that tumult of disconnected ideas, the push-button he had installed in the casket. At the same moment, his brother's face, callous, ironic, touched with a thin, ambiguous sneer, appeared like a hallucination from the darkness; and the newest of his fears came back upon him with sickening certitude. In a flash, he saw the face presiding above the entire process through which, by the illegal connivance of the doctor, he must have been hurried into the tomb without passing through an embalmer's hands. Fearing that he might revive at any moment, they had taken no chances — and had doomed him to this horror.

The mocking face, the cruel vision, seemed to disappear; and among his disordered, frenzy-driven thoughts there rose an irrational hope. Perhaps he had been wrong in his doubts of Guy. Perhaps the electrical device would work after all, and a light pressure would summon eager hands to loose him from his mortuary confinement. He forgot the ghastly chain of condemning logic.

Quickly, by an automatic impulse, he groped for the button. At first he did not find it, and a sick consternation filled him. Then, at last, his fingers touched it and he pressed the button again and again, listening desperately for the answering clang of the alarm gong in the chapel above. Surely he would hear it, even through the intervening wood and stone; and he tried insanely to believe that he *had* heard it — that he could even hear the sound of running footsteps somewhere above him. After seeming hours, with a hideous lapse into the most abominable despond, he realized that there was nothing — nothing but the stilled clamor of his own imprisoned heart.

For a while, he yielded to madness, as on that former occasion, beating obviously against the sides of the casket, hurling himself blindly at the inexorable lid. He shrieked again and again, and the narrow space seemed to drown him with a volume of thick, demoniacally deep sound, which he did not recognize as his own voice or the voice of anything human. Exhaustion, and the wet, salty taste of blood in his mouth, flowing from his bruised face, brought him back at last to comparative calmness.

He perceived now that he was breathing with great difficulty — that his violent struggles and cries had served only to deplete the scant amount of air in the casket. In a moment of unnatural coolness, he recalled something that he had read, somewhere, about a method of shallow breathing by which men could survive protracted periods of inhumation. He must force himself to inhale lightly, must center all his faculties on the prolongation of life. Perhaps, even yet, if he could hold out, his rescuers would come. Perhaps the alarm *had* rung, and he had not been able to hear it. Men were hurrying to his aid, and he must not perish before they could lift the slab and break open the casket.

He wanted to live, as never before; he longed, with intolerable avidity, to breathe the open air once more, to know the unimaginable bliss of free movement and respiration. God! if someone would only come — if he could hear the ring of footsteps, the sullen grating of the slab, the hammers and chisels that would let in the blessed light, the pure air! Was this all that he could ever know, this dumb horror of living interment, this blind, cramped agony of slow suffocation?

He strove to breathe quietly, with no waste or effort, but his throat and chest seemed to constrict as with the inexorable tightening of some atrocious torture instrument. There was no relief, no escape, nothing but a

ceaseless, relentless pressure, the strangling clutch of some monstrous garrote that compressed his lungs, his heart, his windpipe, his very brain.

The agony increased: there was a weight of piled monuments upon him, which he must lift if he were to breathe freely. He strove against the funereal burden. He seemed to hear, at the same time, the labored sound of some Cyclopean engine that sought to make headway in a subterranean passage beneath fallen masses of earth and mountainous stone. He did not know that the sound was his own tortured gasping. The engine seemed to pant, thunderous and stertorous, with earth-shaking vibrations, and upon it, he thought, the foundations of ruined worlds were descending slowly and steadily, to choke it into ultimate silence.

The last agonies of his asphyxiation were translated into a monstrous delirium, a phantasmagoria that seemed to prolong itself for cycles, with one implacable dream passing without transition into another.

He thought that he was lying captive in some Inquisitorial vault whose roof, floor and walls were closing upon him with appalling speed, were crushing him in their adamantine embrace.

For an instant, in a light that was not light, he strove to flee with leaden limbs from a formless, nameless juggernaut, taller than the stars, heavier than the world, that rolled upon him in black, iron silence, grinding him beneath it into the charnel dust of some nethermost limbo.

He was climbing eternal stairs, bearing in his arms the burden of some gigantic corpse, only to have the stairs crumble beneath him at each step, and to fall back with the corpse lying upon him and swelling to macrocosmic proportions.

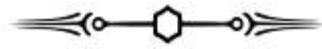
Eyeless giants had stretched him prone on a granite plain and were building upon his chest, block by colossal block, through eons of slow toil, the black Babel of a sunless world.

An anaconda of black, living metal, huger than the Python of myth, coiling about him in the pit where he had fallen, constricted his body with its unimaginable folds. In a gray, livid flash, he saw its enormous mouth poised above him, sucking the last breath it had squeezed from his lungs.

With inconceivable swiftness, the head of the anaconda became that of his brother Guy. It mocked him with a vast sneer, it appeared to swell and expand, to lose all human semblance or proportion, to become a blank, dark mass that rushed upon him in cyclonic gloom, driving him down into the space beyond space.

Somewhere in that descent there came to him the unknown, incognizable mercy of nothingness...

The Chain of Aforgomon



IT IS INDEED strange that John Milwarp and his writings should have fallen so speedily into semi-oblivion. His books, treating of Oriental life in a somewhat flowery, romantic style, were popular a few months ago. But now, in spite of their range and penetration, their pervasive verbal sorcery, they are seldom mentioned; and they seem to have vanished unaccountably from the shelves of book-stores and libraries.

Even the mystery of Milwarp's death, baffling to both law and science, has evoked but a passing interest, an excitement quickly lulled and forgotten.

I was well acquainted with Milwarp over a term of years. But my recollection of the man is becoming strangely blurred, like an image in a misted mirror. His dark, half-alien personality, his preoccupation with the occult, his immense knowledge of Eastern life and lore, are things I remember with such effort and vagueness as attends the recovery of a dream. Sometimes I almost doubt that he ever existed. It is as if the man, and all that pertains to him, were being erased from human record by some mysterious acceleration of the common process of obliteration.

In his will, he appointed me his executor. I have vainly tried to interest publishers in the novel he left among his papers: a novel surely not inferior to anything he ever wrote. They say that his vogue has passed. Now I am publishing as a magazine story the contents of the diary kept by Milwarp for a period preceding his demise.

Perhaps, for the open-minded, this diary will explain the enigma of his death. It would seem that the circumstances of that death are virtually

forgotten, and I repeat them here as part of my endeavor to revive and perpetuate Milwarp's memory.

Milwarp had returned to his house in San Francisco after a long sojourn in Indo-China. We who knew him gathered that he had gone into places seldom visited by Occidentals. At the time of his demise he had just finished correcting the typescript of a novel which dealt with the more romantic and mysterious aspects of Burma.

On the morning of April 2nd, 1933, his housekeeper, a middle-aged woman, was startled by a glare of brilliant light which issued from the half-open door of Milwarp's study. It was as if the whole room were in flames. Horrified, the woman hastened to investigate. Entering the study, she saw her master sitting in an armchair at the table, wearing the rich, somber robes of Chinese brocade which he affected as a dressing-gown. He sat stiffly erect, a pen clutched unmoving in his fingers on the open pages of a manuscript volume. About him, in a sort of nimbus, glowed and flickered the strange light; and her only thought was that his garments were on fire.

She ran toward him, crying out a warning. At that moment the weird nimbus brightened intolerably, and the wan early dayshine, the electric bulbs that still burned to attest the night's labor, were alike blotted out. It seemed to the housekeeper that something had gone wrong with the room itself; for the walls and table vanished, and a great, luminous gulf opened before her; and on the verge of the gulf, in a seat that was not his cushioned armchair but a huge and rough-hewn seat of stone, she beheld her master stark and rigid. His heavy brocaded robes were gone, and about him, from head to foot, were blinding coils of pure white fire, in the form of linked chains. She could not endure the brilliance of the chains, and cowering back, she shielded her eyes with her hands. When she dared to look again,

the weird glowing had faded, the room was as usual; and Milwarp's motionless figure was seated at the table in the posture of writing.

Shaken and terrified as she was, the woman found courage to approach her master. A hideous smell of burnt flesh arose from beneath his garments, which were wholly intact and without visible trace of fire. He was dead, his fingers clenched on the pen and his features frozen in a stare of tetanic agony. His neck and wrists were completely encircled by frightful burns that had charred them deeply. The coroner, in his examination, found that these burns, preserving an outline as of heavy links, were extended in long unbroken spirals around the arms and legs and torso. The burning was apparently the cause of Milwarp's death: it was as if iron chains, heated to incandescence, had been wrapped about him.

Small credit was given to the housekeeper's story of what she had seen. No one, however, could suggest an acceptable explanation of the bizarre mystery. There was, at the time, much aimless discussion; but, as I have hinted, people soon turned to other matters. The efforts made to solve the riddle were somewhat perfunctory. Chemists tried to determine the nature of a queer drug, in the form of a gray powder with pearly granules, to whose use Milwarp had become addicted. But their tests merely revealed the presence of an alkaloid whose source and attributes were obscure to Western science.

Day by day, the whole incredible business lapsed from public attention; and those who had known Milwarp began to display the forgetfulness that was no less unaccountable than his weird doom. The housekeeper, who had held steadfastly in the beginning to her story, came at length to share the common dubiety. Her account, with repetition, became vague and contradictory; detail by detail, she seemed to forget the abnormal circumstances that she had witnessed with overwhelming horror.

The manuscript volume, in which Milwarp had apparently been writing at the time of death, was given into my charge with his other papers. It proved to be a diary, its last entry breaking off abruptly. Since reading the diary, I have hastened to transcribe it in my own hand, because, for some mysterious reason, the ink of the original is already fading and has become almost illegible in places.

The reader will note certain lacunae, due to passages written in an alphabet which neither I nor any scholar of my acquaintance can transliterate. These passages seem to form an integral part of the narrative, and they occur mainly toward the end, as if the writer had turned more and more to a language remembered from his ancient avatar. To the same mental reversion one must attribute the singular dating, in which Milwarp, still employing English script, appears to pass from our contemporary notation to that of some premundane world.

I give hereunder the entire diary, which begins with an undated footnote:

This book, unless I have been misinformed concerning the qualities of the drug *souvara*, will be the record of my former life in a lost cycle. I have had the drug in my possession for seven months, but fear has prevented me from using it. Now, by certain tokens, I perceive that the longing for knowledge will soon overcome the fear. Ever since my earliest childhood I have been troubled by intimations, dim, unplaceable, that seemed to argue a forgotten existence. These intimations partook of the nature of feelings rather than ideas or images: they were like the wraiths of dead memories. In the background of my mind there has lurked a sentiment of formless, melancholy desire for some nameless beauty long perished out of time. And, coincidentally, I have been haunted by an equally formless dread, an apprehension as of some bygone but still imminent doom.

Such feelings have persisted, undiminished, throughout my youth and maturity, but nowhere have I found any clue to their causation. My travels in the mystic Orient, my delvings into occultism have merely convinced me that these shadowy intuitions pertain to some incarnation buried under the wreck of remotest cycles.

Many times, in my wanderings through Buddhistic lands, I had heard of the drug *souvara*, which is believed to restore, even for the uninitiate, the memory of other lives. And at last, after many vain efforts, I managed to procure a supply of the drug. The manner in which I obtained it is a tale sufficiently remarkable in itself, but of no special relevance here. So far — perhaps because of that apprehension which I have hinted — I have not dared to use the drug.

March 9th, 1933. This morning I took *souvara* for the first time, dissolving the proper amount in pure distilled water as I had been instructed to do. Afterward I leaned back easily in my chair, breathing with a slow, regular rhythm. I had no preconceived idea of the sensations that would mark the drug's initial effect, since these were said to vary prodigiously with the temperament of the users; but I composed myself to await them with tranquility, after formulating clearly in my mind the purpose of the experiment. For a while there was no change in my awareness. I noticed a slight quickening of the pulse, and modulated my breathing in conformity with this. Then, by slow degrees, I experienced a sharpening of visual perception. The Chinese rugs on the floor, the backs of the serried volumes in my bookcases, the very wood of chairs, table and shelves, began to exhibit new and unimagined colors. At the same time there were curious alterations of outline, every object seeming to extend itself in a hitherto unsuspected fashion. Following this, my surroundings became semi-transparent, like molded shapes of mist. I found that I could see through the

marbled cover the illustrations in a volume of John Martin's edition of *Paradise Lost*, which lay before me on the table.

All this, I knew, was a mere extension of ordinary physical vision. It was only a prelude to those apperceptions of occult realms which I sought through *souvara*. Fixing my mind once more on the goal of the experiment, I became aware that the misty walls had vanished like a drawn arras. About me, like reflections in rippled water, dim sceneries wavered and shifted, erasing one another from instant to instant. I seemed to hear a vague but ever-present sound, more musical than the murmurs of air, water or fire, which was a property of the unknown element that environed me.

With a sense of troublous familiarity, I beheld the blurred unstable pictures which flowed past me upon this never-resting medium. Orient temples, flashing with sun-struck bronze and gold; the sharp, crowded gables and spires of medieval cities; tropic and northern forests; the costumes and physiognomies of the Levant, of Persia, of old Rome and Carthage, went by like blown, flying mirages. Each succeeding tableau belonged to a more ancient period than the one before it — and I knew that each was a scene from some former existence of my own.

Still tethered, as it were, to my present self, I reviewed these visible memories, which took on tri-dimensional depth and clarity. I saw myself as warrior and troubadour, as noble and merchant and mendicant. I trembled with dead fears, I thrilled with lost hopes and raptures, and was drawn by ties that death and Lethe had broken. Yet never did I fully identify myself with those other avatars: for I knew well that the memory I sought pertained to some incarnation of older epochs.

Still the fantasmagoria streamed on, and I turned giddy with vertigo ineffable before the vastness and diuturnity of the cycles of being. It seemed

that I, the watcher, was lost in a gray land where the homeless ghosts of all dead ages went fleeing from oblivion to oblivion.

The walls of Nineveh, the columns and towers of unnamed cities, rose before me and were swept away. I saw the luxuriant plains that are now the Gobi desert. The searot capitals of Atlantis were drawn to the light in unquenched glory. I gazed on lush and cloudy scenes from the first continents of Earth. Briefly I relived the beginnings of terrestrial man — and knew that the secret I would learn was ancients even than these.

My visions faded into black voidness — and yet, in that void, through fathomless eons, it seemed that I existed still like a blind atom in the space between the worlds. About me was the darkness and repose of that night which antedated the Earth's creation. Time flowed backward with the silence of dreamless sleep...

The illumination, when it came, was instant and complete. I stood in the full, fervid blaze of day amid royally towering blossoms in a deep garden, beyond whose lofty, vine-clad walls I heard the confused murmuring of the great city called Kalood. Above me, at their vernal zenith, were the four small suns that illumed the planet Hestan. Jewel-colored insects fluttered about me, lighting without fear on the rich habiliments of gold and black, enwrought with astronomic symbols, in which I was attired. Beside me was a dial-shaped altar of zoned agate, carved with the same symbols, which were those of the dreadful omnipotent time-god, Aforgomon, whom I served as a priest.

I had not even the slightest memory of myself as John Milwarp, and the long pageant of my terrestrial lives was as something that had never been — or was yet to be. Sorrow and desolation choked my heart as ashes fill some urn consecrated to the dead; and all the hues and perfumes of the garden about me were redolent only of the bitterness of death. Gazing

darkly upon the altar, I muttered blasphemy against Aforgomon, who, in his inexorable course, had taken away my beloved and had sent no solace for my grief. Separately I cursed the signs upon the altar: the stars, the worlds, the suns, the moons, that meted and fulfilled the processes of time. Belthoris, my betrothed, had died at the end of the previous autumn: and so, with double maledictions, I cursed the stars and planets presiding over that season.

I became aware that a shadow had fallen beside my own on the altar, and knew that the dark sage and sorcerer Atmox had obeyed my summons. Fearfully but not without hope I turned toward him, noting first of all that he bore under his arm a heavy, sinister-looking volume with covers of black steel and hasps of adamant. Only when I had made sure of this did I lift my eyes to his face, which was little less somber and forbidding than the tome he carried.

“Greeting, O Calaspa,” he said harshly. “I have come against my own will and judgment. The lore that you request is in this volume; and since you saved me in former years from the inquisitorial wrath of the time-god’s priests, I cannot refuse to share it with you. But understand well that even I, who have called upon names that are dreadful to utter, and have evoked forbidden presences, shall never dare to assist you in this conjuration. Gladly would I help you to hold converse with the shadow of Belthoris, or to animate her still unwithered body and draw it forth from the tomb. But that which you purpose is another matter. You alone must perform the ordained rites, must speak the necessary words: for the consequences of this thing will be direr than you deem.’

“I care not for the consequences,” I replied eagerly, “if it be possible to bring back the lost hours which I shared with Belthoris. Think you that I could content myself with her shadow, wandering thinly back from the

Borderland? Or that I could take pleasure in the fair clay that the breath of necromancy has troubled and has made to arise and walk without mind or soul? Nay, the Belthoris I would summon is she on whom the shadow of death has never yet fallen!

It seemed that Atmox, the master of doubtful arts, the vassal of umbrageous powers, recoiled and blenched before my vehement declaration.

“Bethink you,” he said with minatory sternness, “that this thing will constitute a breach of the sacred logic of time and a blasphemy against Aforgomon, god of the minutes and the cycles. Moreover, there is little to be gained: for not in its entirety may you bring back the season of your love, but only one single hour, torn with infinite violence from its rightful period in time... Refrain, I adjure you, and content yourself with a lesser sorcery.”

“Give me the book,” I demanded. “My service to Aforgomon is forfeit. With due reverence and devotion I have worshipped the time-god, and have done in his honor the rites ordained from eternity; and for all this the god has betrayed me.”

Then, in that high-climbing, luxuriant garden beneath the four suns, Atmox opened the adamantine clasps of the steel-bound volume; and, turning to a certain page, he laid the book reluctantly in my hands. The page, like its fellows, was of some unholy parchment streaked with musty discolorations and blackening at the margin with sheer antiquity; but upon it shone unquenchably the dread characters a primal age had written with an ink bright as the newshed ichor of demons. Above this page I bent in my madness, conning it over and over till I was dazzled by the fiery runes; and, shutting my eyes, I saw them burn on a red darkness, still legible, and writhing like hellish worms.

Hollowly, like the sound of a far bell, I heard the voice of Atmox: “You have learned, O Calaspa, the unutterable name of that One whose assistance can alone restore the fled hours. And you have learned the incantation that will rouse that hidden power, and the sacrifice needed for its propitiation. Knowing these things, is your heart still strong and your purpose firm?”

The name I had read in the wizard volume was that of the chief cosmic power antagonistic to Aforgomon; the incantation and the required offering were those of a foul demonolatry. Nevertheless, I did not hesitate, but gave resolute affirmative answer to the somber query of Atmox.

Perceiving that I was inflexible, he bowed his head, trying no more to dissuade me. Then, as the flame-runed volume had bade me do, I defiled the altar of Aforgomon, blotting certain of its prime symbols with dust and spittle.

While Atmox looked on in silence, I wounded my right arm to its deepest vein on the sharp-tipped gnomon of the dial; and, letting the blood drip from zone to zone, from orb to orb on the graven agate, I made unlawful sacrifice, and intoned aloud, in the name of the Lurking Chaos, Xexanoth, an abominable ritual composed by a backward repetition and jumbling of litanies sacred to the time-god.

Even as I chanted the incantation, it seemed that webs of shadow were woven foully athwart the suns; and the ground shook a little, as if colossal demons trod the world’s rim, striding stupendously from abysses beyond. The garden walls and trees wavered like a wind-blown reflection in a pool; and I grew faint with the loss of that life-blood I had poured out in demonolatrous offering. Then, in my flesh and in my brain, I felt the intolerable racking of a vibration like the long-drawn shock of cities riven by earthquake, and coasts crumbling before some chaotic sea; and my flesh

was torn and harrowed, and my brain shuddered with the toneless discords sweeping through me from deep to deep.

I faltered, and confusion gnawed at my inmost being. Dimly I heard the prompting of Atmox, and dimmer still was the sound of my own voice that made answer to Xexanoth, naming the impious necromancy which was to be effected only through its power. Madly I implored from Xexanoth, in despite of time and its ordered seasons, one hour of that bygone autumn which I had shared with Belthoris; and imploring this, I named no special hour: for all, in memory, had seemed of an equal joy and gladness.

As the words ceased upon my lips, I thought that darkness fluttered in the air like a great wing; and the four suns went out, and my heart was stilled as if in death. Then the light returned, falling obliquely from suns mellow with full-tided autumn; and nowhere beside me was there any shadow of Atmox; and the altar of zoned agate was bloodless and undefiled. I, the lover of Belthoris, witting not of the doom and sorrow to come, stood happily with my beloved before the altar, and saw her young hands crown its ancient dial with the flowers we had plucked from the garden.

Dreadful beyond all fathoming are the mysteries of time. Even I, the priest and initiate, though wise in the secret doctrines of Aforgomon, know little enough of that elusive, ineluctable process whereby the present becomes the past and the future resolves itself into the present. All men have pondered the riddles of duration and transience; have wondered, vainly, to what bourn the lost days and the sped cycles are consigned. Some have dreamt that the past abides unchanged, becoming eternity as it slips from our mortal ken; and others have deemed that time is a stairway whose steps crumble one by one behind the climber, falling into a gulf of nothing.

Howsoever this may be, I know that she who stood beside me was the Belthoris on whom no shadow of mortality had yet descended. The hour

was one new-born in a golden season; and the minutes to come were pregnant with all wonder and surprise belonging to the untried future.

Taller was my beloved than the frail, unbowed lilies of the garden. In her eyes was the sapphire of moonless evenings sown with small golden stars. Her lips were strangely curved, but only blitheness and joy had gone to their shaping. She and I had been betrothed from our childhood, and the time of the marriage-rites was now approaching. Our intercourse was wholly free, according to the custom of that world. Often she came to walk with me in my garden and to decorate the altar of that god whose revolving moons and suns would soon bring the season of our felicity.

The moths that flew about us, winged with aerial cloth-of-gold, were no lighter than our hearts. Making blithe holiday, we fanned our frolic mood to a high flame of rapture. We were akin to the full-hued, climbing flowers, the swift-darting insects, and our spirits blended and soared with the perfumes that were drawn skyward in the warm air. Unheard by us was the loud murmuring of the mighty city of Kalood lying beyond my garden walls; for us the many-peopled planet known as Hestan no longer existed; and we dwelt alone in a universe of light, in a blossomed heaven. Exalted by love in the high harmony of those moments, we seemed to touch eternity; and even I, the priest of Aforgomon, forgot the blossom-fretting days, the system-devouring cycles.

In the sublime folly of passion, I swore then that death or discord could never mar the perfect communion of our hearts. After we had wreathed the altar, I sought the rarest, the most delectable flowers; frail-curving cups of winewashed pearl, of moony azure and white with scrolled purple lips; and these I twined, between kisses and laughter, in the blaze maze of Belthoris' hair; saying that another shrine than that of time should receive its due offering.

Tenderly, with a lover's delay, I lingered over the wreathing; and, ere I had finished, there fluttered to the ground beside us a great, crimson-spotted moth whose wing had somehow been broken in its airy voyaging through the garden. And Belthoris, ever tender of heart and pitiful, turned from me and took up the moth in her hands; and some of the bright blossoms dropped from her hair unheeded. Tears welled from her deep blue eyes; and seeing that the moth was sorely hurt and would never fly again, she refused to be comforted; and no longer would she respond to my passionate wooing. I, who grieved less for the moth than she, was somewhat vexed; and between her sadness and my vexation, there grew between us some tiny, temporary rift...

Then, ere love had ended the misunderstanding; then while we stood before the dread altar of time with sundered hands, with eyes averted from each other, it seemed that a shroud of darkness descended upon the garden. I heard the crash and crumbling of shattered worlds, and a black flowing of ruinous things that went past me through the darkness. The dead leaves of winter were blown about me, and there was a falling of tears or rain... Then the vernal suns came back, high-stationed in cruel splendor; and with them came the knowledge of all that had been, of Belthoris' death and my sorrow, and the madness that had led to forbidden sorcery. Vain now, like all other hours, was the resummoned hour; and doubly irredeemable was my loss. My blood dripped heavily on the dishallowed altar, my faintness grew deathly, and I saw through murky mist the face of Atmox beside me; and the face was like that of some comminatory demon...

March 13th. I, John Milwarp, write this date and my name with an odd dubiety. My visionary experience under the drug *souvara* ended with that rilling of my blood on the symbolized dial, that glimpse of the terror-distorted face of Atmox. All this was in another world, in a life removed from the

present by births and deaths without number; and yet, it seems, not wholly have I returned from the twice-ancient past. Memories, broken but strangely vivid and living, press upon me from the existence of which my vision was a fragment; and portions of the lore of Hestan, and scraps of its history, and words from its lost language, arise unbidden in my mind.

Above all, my heart is still shadowed by the sorrow of Calaspa. His desperate necromancy, which would seem to others no more than a dream within a dream, is stamped as with fire on the black page of recollection. I know the awfulness of the god he had blasphemed; and the foulness of the demonolatry he had done, and the sense of guilt and despair under which he swooned. It is this that I have striven all my life to remember, this which I have been doomed to re-experience. And I fear with a great fear the further knowledge which a second experiment with the drug will reveal to me.

The next entry of Milwarp's diary begins with a strange dating in English script: 'The second day of the moon Occalat, in the thousand-and-ninth year of the Red Eon.' This dating, perhaps, is repeated in the language of Hestan: for, directly beneath it, a line of unknown ciphers is set apart. Several lines of the subsequent text are in the alien tongue; and then, as if by an unconscious reversion, Milwarp continues the diary in English. There is no reference to another experiment with *souvara*: but apparently such had been made, with a continued revival of his lost memories.

...What genius of the nadir gulf had tempted me to this thing and had caused me to overlook the consequences? Verily, when I called up for myself and Belthoris an hour of former autumn, with all that was attendant upon the hour, *that bygone interim was likewise evoked and repeated for the whole world Hestan, and the four suns of Hestan*. From the full midst of spring, all men had stepped backward into autumn, keeping only the memory of things prior to the hour thus resurrected, and knowing not the

events future to the hour. But, returning to the present, they recalled with amazement the unnatural necromancy; and fear and bewilderment were upon them; and none could interpret the meaning.

For a brief period, the dead had lived again; the fallen leaves had returned to the bough; the heavenly bodies had stood at a long-abandoned station; the flower had gone back into the seed, the plant into the root. Then, with eternal disorder set among all its cycles, time had resumed its delayed course.

No movement of any cosmic body, no year or instant of the future, would be precisely as it should have been. The error and discrepancy I had wrought would bear fruit in ways innumerable. The suns would find themselves at fault; the worlds and atoms would go always a little astray from their appointed bourns.

It was of these matters that Atmox spoke, warning me, after he had staunched my bleeding wound. For he too, in that relumined hour, had gone back and had lived again through a past happening. For him the hour was one in which he had descended into the nether vaults of his house. There, standing in a many-pentacled circle, with burning of unholy incense and uttering of accurst formulae, he had called upon a malign spirit from the bowels of Hestan and had questioned it concerning the future. But the spirit, black and voluminous as the fumes of pitch, refused to answer him directly and pressed furiously with its clawed members against the confines of the circle. It said only: "Thou hast summoned me at thy peril. Potent are the spells thou hast used, and strong is the circle to withstand me, and I am restrained by time and space from the wreaking of my anger upon thee. *But haply thou shalt summon me again, albeit in the same hour of the same autumn*; and in that summoning the laws of time shall be broken, and a rift

shall be made in space; and through the rift, though with some delay and divagation, I will yet win to thee.”

Saying no more, it prowled restlessly about the circle; and its eyes burned down upon Atmox like embers in a highlifted sooty brazier; and ever and anon its fanged mouth was flattened on the spell-defended air. And in the end he could dismiss it only after a double repetition of the form of exorcism.

As he told me this tale in the garden, Atmox trembled; and his eyes searched the narrow shadows wrought by the high suns; and he seemed to listen for the noise of some evil thing that burrowed toward him beneath the earth.

Fourth day of the moon Occalat. Stricken with terrors beyond those of Atmox, I kept apart in my mansion amid the city of Kalood. I was still weak with the loss of blood I had yielded to Xexanoth; my senses were full of strange shadows; my servitors, coming and going about me, were as phantoms, and scarcely I heeded the pale fear in their eyes or heard the dreadful things they whispered... Madness and chaos, they told me, were abroad in Kalood; the divinity of Aforgomon was angered. All men thought that some baleful doom impended because of that unnatural confusion which had been wrought among the hours of time.

This afternoon they brought me the story of Atmox’s death. In bated tones they told me how his neophytes had heard a roaring as of a loosed tempest in the chamber where he sat alone with his wizard volumes and paraphernalia. Above the roaring, for a little, human screams had sounded, together with a dashing as of hurled censers and braziers, a crashing as of overthrown tables and tomes. Blood rilled from under the shut door of the chamber, and, rilling, it took from instant to instant the form of dire ciphers that spelt an unspeakable name. After the noises had ceased, the neophytes

waited a long while ere they dared to open the door. Entering at last, they saw the floor and the walls heavily bespattered with blood, and rags of the sorcerer's raiment mingled everywhere with the sheets of his torn volumes of magic, and the shreds and manglings of his flesh strewn amid broken furniture, and his brains daubed in a horrible paste on the high ceiling.

Hearing this tale, I knew that the earthly demon feared by Atmox had found him somehow and had wreaked its wrath upon him. In ways unguessable, it had reached him through the chasm made in ordered time and space by one hour repeated through necromancy. And because of that lawless chasm, the magician's power and lore had utterly failed to defend him from the demon...

Fifth day of the moon Occalat. Atmox, I am sure, had not betrayed me: for in so doing, he must have betrayed his own implicit share in my crime... Howbeit, this evening the priests came to my house ere the setting of the westernmost sun: silent, grim, with eyes averted as if from a foulness innominable. Me, their fellow, they enjoined with loth gestures to accompany them...

Thus they took me from my house and along the thoroughfares of Kalood toward the lowering suns. The streets were empty of all other passers, and it seemed that no man desired to meet or behold the blasphemer...

Down the avenue of gnomon-shaped pillars, I was led to the portals of Aforgomon's fane: those awfully gaping portals arched in the likeness of some devouring chimera's mouth...

Sixth day of the moon Occalat. They had thrust me into an oubliette beneath the temple, dark, noisome and soundless except for the maddening, measured drip of water beside me. There I lay and knew not when the night

passed and the morning came. Light was admitted only when my captors opened the iron door, coming to lead me before the tribunal...

...Thus the priests condemned me, speaking with one voice in whose dreadful volume the tones of all were indistinguishably blended. Then the aged high-priest Helpenor called aloud upon Aforgomon, offering himself as a mouthpiece to the god, and asking the god to pronounce through him the doom that was adequate for such enormities as those of which I had been judged guilty by my fellows.

Instantly, it seemed, the god descended into Helpenor; and the figure of the high-priest appeared to dilate prodigiously beneath his mufflings; and the accents that issued from his mouth were like thunders of the upper heaven:

“O Calaspa, thou hast set disorder amid all future hours and eons through this evil necromancy. Thereby, moreover, thou hast wrought thine own doom: fettered art thou for ever to the hour thus unlawfully repeated, apart from its due place in time. According to hieratic rule, thou shalt meet the death of the fiery chains: but deem not that this death is more than the symbol of thy true punishment. Thou shalt pass hereafter through other lives in Hestan, and shalt climb midway in the cycles of the world subsequent to Hestan in time and space. But through all thine incarnations the chaos thou hast invoked will attend thee widening ever like a rift. And always, in all thy lives, the rift will bar thee from reunion with the soul of Belthoris; and always, though merely by an hour, thou shalt miss the love that should otherwise have been oftentimes regained.”

“At last, when the chasm has widened overmuch, thy soul shall fare no farther in the onward cycles of incarnation. At that time it shall be given thee to remember clearly thine ancient sin; and remembering, thou shalt perish out of time. Upon the body of that latter life shall be found the

charred imprint of the chains, as the final token of thy bondage. But they that knew thee will soon forget, and thou shalt belong wholly to the cycles limited for thee by thy sin.”

March 29th. I write this date with infinite desperation, trying to convince myself that there is a John Milwarp who exists on Earth, in the Twentieth Century. For two days running, I have not taken the drug *souvara*: and yet I have returned twice to that oubliette of Aforgomon’s temple, in which the priest Calaspa awaits his doom. Twice I have been immersed in its stagnant darkness, hearing the slow drip of water beside me, like a clepsydra that tells the black ages of the damned.

Even as I write this at my library table, it seems that an ancient midnight plucks at the lamp. The bookcases turn to walls of oozing, nighted stone. There is no longer a table ... nor one who writes... and I breathe the noisome dankness of a dungeon lying unfathomed by any sun, in a lost world.

Eighteenth day of the moon Occalat. Today, for the last time, they took me from my prison. Helpenor, together with three others, came and led me to the adytum of the god. Far beneath the outer temple we went, through spacious crypts unknown to the common worshippers. There was no word spoken, no glance exchanged between the others and me; and it seemed that they already regarded me as one cast out from time and claimed by oblivion.

We came ultimately to that sheer-falling gulf in which the spirit of Aforgomon is said to dwell. Lights, feeble and far-scattered, shone around it like stars on the rim of cosmic vastness, shedding no ray into the depths. There, in a seat of hewn stone overhanging the frightful verge, I was placed by the executioners; and a ponderous chain of black unruined metal, stapled to the solid rock, was wound about and about me, circling my naked body and separate limbs, from head to foot.

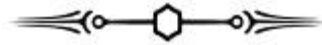
To this doom, others had been condemned for heresy or impiety... though never for a sin such as mine. After the chaining of the victim, he was left for a stated interim, to ponder his crime — and haply to confront the dark divinity of Aforgomon. At length, from the abyss into which his position forced him to peer, a light would dawn, and a bolt of strange flame would leap upward, striking the many coiled chain about him and heating it instantly to the whiteness of incandescent iron. The source and nature of the flame were mysterious, and many ascribed it to the god himself rather than to mortal agency...

Even thus they have left me, and have gone away. Long since the burden of the massy links, cutting deeper and deeper into my flesh, has become an agony. I am dizzy from gazing downward into the abyss — and yet I cannot fall. Beneath, immeasurably beneath, at recurrent intervals, I hear a hollow and solemn sound. Perhaps it is the sigh of sunken waters ... of cavern-straying winds ... or the respiration of One that abides in the darkness, meting with his breath the slow minutes, the hours, the days, the ages... My terror has become heavier than the chain, my vertigo is born of a two-fold gulf...

Eons have passed by and all the worlds have ebbed into nothingness, like wreckage borne on a chasm-falling stream, taking with them the lost face of Belthoris. I am poised above the gaping maw of the Shadow... Somehow, in another world, an exile phantom has written these words... a phantom who must fade utterly from time and place, even as I, the doomed priest Calaspa. I cannot remember the name of the phantom.

Beneath me, in the black depths, there is an awful brightening...

The Dark Eidolon



Thasaidon, lord of seven hells
Wherein the single Serpent dwells,
With volumes drawn from pit to pit
Through fire and darkness infinite —
Thasaidon, sun of nether skies,
Thine ancient evil never dies,
For aye thy somber fulgors flame
On sunken worlds that have no name,
Man's heart enthrones thee, still supreme,
Though the false sorcerers blaspheme.
— *The Song of Xeethra*

ON ZOTHIQUE, the last continent on Earth, the sun no longer shone with the whiteness of its prime, but was dim and tarnished as if with a vapor of blood. New stars without number had declared themselves in the heavens, and the shadows of the infinite had fallen closer. And out of the shadows, the older gods had returned to man: the gods forgotten since Hyperborea, since Mu and Poseidonis, bearing other names but the same attributes. And the elder demons had also returned, battenning on the fumes of evil sacrifice, and fostering again the primordial sorceries.

Many were the necromancers and magicians of Zothique, and the infamy and marvel of their doings were legended everywhere in the latter days. But among them all there was none greater than Namirrha, who imposed his

black yoke on the cities of Xylac, and later, in a proud delirium, deemed himself the veritable peer of Thasaidon, lord of Evil.

Namirrha had built his abode in Ummaos, the chief town of Xylac, to which he came from the desert realm of Tasuun with the dark renown of his thaumaturgies like a cloud of desert storm behind him. And no man knew that in coming to Ummaos he returned to the city of his birth; for all deemed him a native of Tasuun. Indeed, none could have dreamt that the great sorcerer was one with the beggar-boy Narthos, an orphan of questionable parentage, who had begged his daily bread in the streets and bazaars of Ummaos. Wretchedly had he lived, alone and despised; and a hatred of the cruel, opulent city grew in his heart like a smothered flame that feeds in secret, biding the time when it shall become a conflagration consuming all things.

Bitterer always, through his boyhood and early youth, was the spleen and rancor of Narthos toward men. And one day the prince Zotulla, a boy but little older than he, riding a restive palfrey, came upon him in the square before the imperial palace; and Narthos implored an alms. But Zotulla, scorning his plea, rode arrogantly forward, spurring the palfrey; and Narthos was ridden down and trampled under its hooves. And afterward, nigh to death from the trampling, he lay senseless for many hours, while the people passed him by unheeding. And at last, regaining his senses, he dragged himself to his hovel; but he limped a little thereafter all his days, and the mark of one hoof remained like a brand on his body, fading never. Later, he left Ummaos, and was forgotten quickly by its people. Going southward into Tasuun, he lost his way in the great desert, and was near to perishing. But finally he came to a small oasis, where dwelt the wizard Ouphaloc, a hermit who preferred the company of honest jackals and hyenas to that of men. And Ouphaloc, seeing the great craft and evil in the

starveling boy, gave succor to Narthos and sheltered him. He dwelt for years with Ouphaloc, becoming the wizard's pupil and the heir of his demon-wrested lore. Strange things he learned in that hermitage, being fed on fruits and grain that had sprung not from the watered earth, and wine that was not the juice of terrene grapes. And like Ouphaloc, he became a master in devildom and drove his own bond with the archfiend Thasaidon. When Ouphaloc died, he took the name of Namirrha, and went forth as a mighty sorcerer among the wandering peoples and the deep-buried mummies of Tasuun. But never could he forget the miseries of his boyhood in Ummaos and the wrong he had endured from Zotulla; and year by year he spun over in his thoughts the black web of revenge. And his fame grew ever darker and vaster, and men feared him in remote lands beyond Tasuun. With bated whispers they spoke of his deeds in the cities of Yoros, and in Zul-Bha-Shair, the abode of the ghoulish deity Mordiggian. And long before the coming of Namirrha himself, the people of Ummaos knew him as a fabled scourge that was direr than simoom or pestilence.

Now, in the years that followed the going-forth of the boy Narthos from Ummaos, Pithaim, the father of Prince Zotulla, was slain by the sting of a small adder that had crept into his bed for warmth on an autumn night. Some said that the adder had been purveyed by Zotulla, but this was a thing that no man could verily affirm. After the death of Pithaim, Zotulla, being his only son, was emperor of Xylac, and ruled evilly from his throne in Ummaos. Indolent he was, and tyrannic, and full of strange luxuries and cruelties; but the people, who were also evil, acclaimed him in his turpitude. So he prospered, and the lords of Hell and Heaven smote him not. And the red suns and ashen moons went westward over Xylac, falling into that seldom-voyaged sea, which, if the mariners' tales were true, poured

evermore like a swiftening river past the infamous isle of Naat, and fell in a worldwide cataract upon nether space from the far, sheer edge of Earth.

Grosser still he grew, and his sins were as overswollen fruits that ripen above a deep abyss. But the winds of time blew softly; and the fruits fell not. And Zotulla laughed amid his fools and his eunuchs and his lemans; and the tale of his luxuries was borne afar, and was told by dim outland peoples, as a twin marvel with the bruited necromancies of Namirrha.

It came to pass, in the year of the Hyena, and the month of the star Canicule, that a great feast was given by Zotulla to the inhabitants of Ummaos. Meats that had been cooked in exotic spices from Sotar, isle of the east, were spread everywhere; and the ardent wines of Yoros and Xylac, filled as with subterranean fires, were poured inexhaustibly from huge urns for all. The wines awoke a furious mirth and a royal madness; and afterward they brought a slumber no less profound than the Lethe of the tomb. And one by one, as they drank, the revellers fell down in the streets, the houses and gardens, as if a plague had struck them; and Zotulla slept in his banquet-hall of gold and ebony, with his odalisques and chamberlains about him. So, in all Ummaos, there was no man or woman wakeful at the hour when Sirius began to fall toward the west.

Thus it was that none saw or heard the coming of Namirrha. But awakening heavily in the latter forenoon, the emperor Zotulla heard a confused babble, a troublous clamor of voices from such of his eunuchs and women as had awakened before him. Inquiring the cause, he was told that a strange prodigy had occurred during the night; but, being still bemused with wine and slumber, he comprehended little enough of its nature, till his favorite concubine, Obexah, led him to the eastern portico of the palace, from which he could behold the marvel with his own eyes.

Now the palace stood alone at the center of Ummaos, and to the north, west and south, for wide intervals of distance, there stretched the imperial gardens, full of superbly arching palms and loftily spiring fountains. But to eastward was a broad open area, used as a sort of common, between the palace and the mansions of high optimates. And in this space, which had lain wholly vacant at eve, a building towered colossal and lordly beneath the full-risen sun, with domes like monstrous fungi of stone that had come up in the night. And the domes, rearing level with those of Zotulla, were builded of death-white marble; and the huge façade, with multi-columned porticoes and deep balconies, was wrought in alternate zones of night-black onyx and porphyry hued as with dragons' blood. And Zotulla swore lewdly, calling with hoarse blasphemies on the gods and devils of Xylac; and great was his dumfoundment, deeming the marvel a work of wizardry. The women gathered about him, crying out with shrill cries of awe and terror; and more and more of his courtiers, awakening, came to swell the hub-bub; and the fat castradoes diddered in their cloth-of-gold like immense black jellies in golden basins. But Zotulla, mindful of his dominion as emperor of all Xylac, strove to conceal his own trepidation, saying:

“Now who is this that has presumed to enter Ummaos like a jackal in the dark, and has made his impious den in proximity and counterview of my palace? Go forth, and inquire the miscreant's name; but ere you go, instruct the headsman to make sharp his double-handed sword.”

Then, fearing the emperor's wrath if they tarried, certain of the chamberlains went forth unwillingly and approached the portals of the strange edifice. It seemed that the portals were deserted till they drew near, and then, on the threshold, there appeared a titanic skeleton, taller than any man of earth; and it strode forward to meet them with ell-long strides. The skeleton was swathed in a loin-cloth of scarlet silk with a buckle of jet, and

it wore a black turban, starred with diamonds, whose topmost foldings nearly touched the high lintel. Eyes like flickering marsh-fires burned in its deep eye-sockets; and a blackened tongue like that of a long-dead man protruded between its teeth; but otherwise it was clean of flesh, and the bones glittered whitely in the sun as it came onward.

The chamberlains were mute before it, and there was no sound except the golden creaking of their girdles, the shrill rustling of their silks, as they shook and trembled. And the foot-bones of the skeleton clicked sharply on the pavement of black onyx as it paused; and the putrefying tongue began to quiver between its teeth; and it uttered these words in an unctuous, nauseous voice:

“Return, and tell the emperor Zotulla that Namirrha, seer and magician, has come to dwell beside him.”

Hearing the skeleton speak as if it had been a living man, and hearing the dread name of Namirrha as men hear the tocsin of doom in some fallen city, the chamberlains could stand before it no longer, and they fled with ungainly swiftness and bore the message to Zotulla.

Now, learning who it was that had come to neighbor with him in Ummaos, the emperor's wrath died out like a feeble and blustering flame on which the wind of darkness had blown; and the vinous purple of his cheeks was mottled with a strange pallor; and he said nothing, but his lips mumbled loosely as if in prayer or malediction. And the news of Namirrha's coming passed like the flight of evil night-birds through all the palace and throughout the city, leaving a noisome terror that abode in Ummaos thereafter till the end. For Namirrha, through the black renown of his thaumaturgies and the frightful entities who served him, had become a power that no secular sovereign dared dispute; and men feared him everywhere, even as they feared the gigantic, shadowy lords of Hell and of

outer space. And in Ummaos, people said that he had come on the desert wind from Tasuun with his underlings, even as the pestilence comes, and had reared his house in an hour with the aid of devils beside Zotulla's palace. And they said that the foundations of the house were laid on the adamantine cope of Hell; and in its floors were pits at whose bottom burned the nether fires, or stars could be seen as they passed under in lowermost night. And the followers of Namirrha were the dead of strange kingdoms, the demons of sky and earth and the abyss, and mad, impious, hybrid things that the sorcerer himself created from forbidden unions.

Men shunned the neighborhood of his lordly house; and in the palace of Zotulla few cared to approach the windows and balconies that gave thereon; and the emperor himself spoke not of Namirrha, pretending to ignore the intruder; and the women of the harem babbled evermore with an evil gossip concerning Namirrha and his concubines. But the sorcerer himself was not beheld by the people of that city, though some believed that he walked forth at will, clad with invisibility. His servitors were likewise not seen; but a howling as of the damned was sometimes heard to issue from his portals; and sometimes there came a strange cachinnation, as if some adamantine image had laughed aloud; and sometimes there was a chuckling like the sound of shattered ice in a frozen hell. Dim shadows moved in the porticoes when there was neither sunlight nor lamp to cast them; and red, eery lights appeared and vanished in the windows at eve, like a blinking of demoniac eyes. And slowly the ember-colored suns went over Xylac, and were quenched in far seas; and the ashy moons were blackened as they fell nightly toward the hidden gulf. Then, seeing that the wizard had wrought no open evil, and that none had endured palpable harm from his presence, the people took heart; and Zotulla drank deeply, and feasted in oblivious luxury as before; and dark Thasaidon, prince of all turpitudes, was the true but

never-acknowledged lord of Xylac. And in time the men of Ummaos bragged a little of Namirrha and his dread thaumaturgies, even as they had boasted of the purple sins of Zotulla.

But Namirrha, still unbeheld by living men and living women, sat in the inner walls of that house which his devils had reared for him, and spun over and over in his thoughts the black web of revenge. And the wrong done by Zotulla to Narthos in old times was the least of those cruelties which the emperor had forgotten.

Now, when the fears of Zotulla were somewhat lulled, and his women gossiped less often of the neighboring wizard, there occurred a new wonder and a fresh terror. For, sitting one eve at his banquet-table with his courtiers about him, the emperor heard a noise as of myriad iron-shod hooves that came trampling through the palace gardens. And the courtiers also heard the sound, and were startled amid their mounting drunkenness; and the emperor was angered, and he sent certain of his guards to examine into the cause of the trampling. But peering forth upon the moon-bright lawns and parterres, the guards beheld no visible shape, though the loud sounds of trampling still went to and fro. It seemed as if a rout of wild stallions passed and re-passed before the façade of the palace with tumultuous gallopings and capricoles. And a fear came upon the guards as they looked and listened; and they dared not venture forth, but returned to Zotulla. And the emperor himself grew sober when he heard their tale; and he went forth with high blusterings to view the prodigy. And all night the unseen hooves rang out sonorously on the pavement of onyx, and ran with deep thuddings over the grasses and flowers. The palm-fronds waved on the windless air as if parted by racing steeds; and visibly the tall-stemmed lilies and broad-petaled exotic blossoms were trodden under. And rage and terror nested together in Zotulla's heart as he stood in a balcony above the garden, hearing the

spectral tumult, and beholding the harm done to his rarest flower-beds. The women, the courtiers and eunuchs cowered behind him, and there was no slumber for any occupant of the palace; but toward dawn the clamor of hooves departed, going toward Namirrha's house.

When the dawn was full-grown above Ummaos, the emperor walked forth with his guards about him, and saw that the crushed grasses and broken-down stems were blackened as if by fire where the hooves had fallen. Plainly were the marks imprinted, like the tracks of a great company of horses, in all the lawns and parterres; but they ceased at the verge of the gardens. And though everyone believed that the visitation had come from Namirrha, there was no proof of this in the grounds that fronted the sorcerer's abode; for here the turf was untrodden.

"A pox upon Namirrha, if he has done this!" cried Zotulla. "For what harm have I ever done him? Verily, I shall set my heel on the dog's neck; and the torture-wheel shall serve him even as these horses from Hell have served my blood-red lilies of Sotar and my vein-colored irises of Naat and my orchids from Uccastrog which were purple as the bruises of love. Yea, though he stand the viceroy of Thasaidon above Earth, and overlord of ten thousand devils, my wheel shall break him, and fires shall heat the wheel white-hot in its turning, till he withers black as the seared blossoms." Thus did Zotulla make his brag; but he issued no orders for the execution of his threat; and no man stirred from the palace towards Namirrha's house. And from the portals of the wizard none came forth; or if any came there was no visible sign or sound.

So the day went over, and the night rose, bringing later a moon that was slightly darkened at the rim. And the night was silent; and Zotulla, sitting long at the banquet-table, drained his wine-cup often and wrathfully, muttering new threats against Namirrha. And the night wore on, and it

seemed that the visitation would not be repeated. But at midnight, lying in his chamber with Obexah, and fathom-deep in his slumber from the wine, Zotulla was awakened by a monstrous clangor of hooves that raced and capered in the palace porticoes and in the long balconies. All night the hooves thundered back and forth, echoing awfully in the vaulted stone, while Zotulla and Obexah, listening, huddled close amid their cushions and coverlets; and all the occupants of the palace, wakeful and fearful, heard the noise but stirred not from their chambers. A little before dawn the hooves departed suddenly; and afterward, by day, their marks were found on the marble flags of the porches and balconies; and the marks were countless, deep-graven, and black as if branded there by flame.

Like mottled marble were the emperor's cheeks when he saw the hoof-printed floors; and terror stayed with him henceforth, following him to the depths of his inebriety, since he knew not where the haunting would cease. His women murmured and some wished to flee from Ummaos, and it seemed that the revels of the day and evening were shadowed by ill wings that left their umbrage in the yellow wine and bedimmed the aureate lamps. And again, toward midnight, the slumber of Zotulla was broken by the hooves, which came galloping and pacing on the palace-roof and through all the corridors and the halls. Thereafter, till dawn, the hooves filled the palace with their iron clatterings, and they rung hollowly on the topmost domes, as if the coursers of gods had trodden there, passing from heaven to heaven in tumultuous cavalcade.

Zotulla and Obexah, lying together while the terrible hooves went to and fro in the hall outside their chamber, had no heart or thought for sin, nor could they find any comfort in their nearness. In the gray hour before dawn they heard a great thundering high on the barred brazen door of the room, as if some mighty stallion, rearing, had drummed there with his forefeet. And

soon after this, the hooves went away, leaving a silence like an interlude in some gathering storm of doom. Later, the marks of the hooves were found everywhere in the halls, marring the bright mosaics. Black holes were burnt in the golden-threaded rugs and the rugs of silver and scarlet; and the high white domes were pitted pox-wise with the marks; and far up on the brazen door of Zotulla's chamber the prints of a horse's forefeet were incised deeply.

Now, in Ummaos, and throughout Xylac, the tale of this haunting became known, and the thing was deemed an ominous prodigy, though people differed in their interpretations. Some held that the sending came from Namirrha, and was meant as a token of his supremacy above all kings and emperors; and some thought that it came from a new wizard who had risen in Tinarath, far to the east, and who wished to supplant Namirrha. And the priests of the gods of Xylac held that their various deities had dispatched the haunting, as a sign that more sacrifices were required in the temples.

Then, in his hall of audience, whose floor of sard and jasper had been grievously pocked by the unseen hooves, Zotulla called together many priests and magicians and soothsayers, and asked them to declare the cause of the sending and devise a mode of exorcism. But, seeing that there was no agreement among them, Zotulla provided the several priestly sects with the wherewithal of sacrifice to their sundry gods, and sent them away; and the wizards and prophets, under threat of decapitation if they refused, were enjoined to visit Namirrha in his mansion of sorcery and learn his will, if haply the sending were his and not the work of another.

Loth were the wizards and the soothsayers, fearing Namirrha, and caring not to intrude upon the frightful mysteries of his obscure mansion. But the swordsmen of the emperor drove them forth, lifting great crescent blades

against them when they tarried; so one by one, in a straggling order, the delegation went towards Namirrha's portals and vanished into the devil-built house.

Pale, muttering and distraught, like men who have looked upon hell and have seen their doom, they returned before sunset to the emperor. And they said that Namirrha had received them courteously and had sent them back with this message:

“Be it known to Zotulla that the haunting is a sign of that which he has long forgotten; and the reason of the haunting will be revealed to him at the hour prepared and set apart by destiny. And the hour draws near: for Namirrha bids the emperor and all his court to a great feast on the afternoon of the morrow.”

Having delivered this message, to the wonder and consternation of Zotulla, the delegation begged his leave to depart. And though the emperor questioned them minutely, they seemed unwilling to relate the circumstances of the visit to Namirrha; nor would they describe the sorcerer's fabled house, except in a vague manner, each contradicting the other as to what he had seen. So, after a little, Zotulla bade them go, and when they had gone he sat musing for a long while on the invitation of Namirrha, which was a thing he cared not to accept but feared to decline. That evening he drank even more liberally than was his wont; and he slept a Lethean slumber, nor was there any noise of trampling hooves about the palace to awaken him. And silently, during the night, the prophets and magicians passed like furtive shadows from Ummaos; and no man saw them depart; and at morning they were gone from Xylac into other lands, never to return...

Now, on that same evening, in the great hall of his house, Namirrha sat alone, having dismissed the familiars who attended him ordinarily. Before

him, on an altar of jet, was the dark, gigantic statue of Thasaidon which a devil-begotten sculptor had wrought in ancient days for an evil king of Tasuun, called Pharnoc. The archdemon was depicted in the guise of a full-armored warrior, lifting a spiky mace as if in heroic battle. Long had the statue lain in the desert-sunken palace of Pharnoc, whose very site was disputed by the nomads; and Namirrha, by his divination, had found it and had reared up the infernal image to abide with him always thereafter. And often, through the mouth of the statue, Thasaidon would utter oracles to Namirrha, or would answer interrogations.

Before the black-armored image there hung seven silver lamps, wrought in the form of horses' skulls, with flames issuing changeably in blue and purple and crimson from their eye-sockets. Wild and lurid was their light, and the face of the demon, peering from under his crested helmet, was filled with malign, equivocal shadows that shifted and changed eternally. And sitting in his serpent-carven chair, Namirrha regarded the statue grimly, with a deep-furrowed frown between his eyes: for he had asked a certain thing of Thasaidon, and the fiend, replying through the statue, had refused him. And rebellion was in the heart of Namirrha, grown mad with pride, and deeming himself the lord of all sorcerers and a ruler by his own right among the princes of devildom. So, after long pondering, he repeated his request in a bold and haughty voice, like one who addresses an equal rather than the all-formidable suzerain to whom he had sworn a fatal fealty.

"I have helped you heretofore in all things," said the image, with stony and sonorous accents that were echoed metallically in the seven silver lamps. "Yea, the undying worms of fire and darkness have come forth like an army at your summons, and the wings of nether genii have risen to occlude the sun when you called them. But, verily, I will not aid you in this vengeance you have planned: for the emperor Zotulla has done me no

wrong and has served me well though unwittingly; and the people of Xylac, by reason of their turpitudes, are not the least of my terrestrial worshippers. Therefore, Namirrha, it were well for you to live in peace with Zotulla, and well to forget this olden wrong that was done to the beggar-boy Narthos. For the ways of destiny are strange, and the workings of its laws sometimes hidden; and truly, if the hooves of Zotulla's palfrey had not spurned you and trodden you under, your life had been otherwise, and the name and renown of Namirrha had still slept in oblivion as a dream undreamed. Yea, you would tarry still as a beggar in Ummaos, content with a beggar's guerdon, and would never have fared forth to become the pupil of the wise and learned Ouphaloc; and I, Thasaidon, would have lost the lordliest of all necromancers who have accepted my service and my bond. Think well, Namirrha, and ponder these matters: for both of us, it would seem, are indebted to Zotulla in all gratitude for the trampling he gave you."

"Yea, there is a debt," Namirrha growled implacably. "And truly I will pay the debt tomorrow, even as I have planned... There are Those who will aid me, Those who will answer my summoning in your despite."

"It is an ill thing to affront me," said the image, after an interval. "And also, it is not wise to call upon Those that you designate. However, I perceive clearly that such is your intent. You are proud and stubborn and revengeful. Do then, as you will, but blame me not for the outcome."

So, after this, there was silence in the hall where Namirrha sat before the idolon; and the flames burned darkly, with changeable colors, in the skull-shapen lamps; and the shadows fled and returned, unresting, on the face of the statue and the face of Namirrha. Then, toward midnight, the necromancer arose and went upward by many spiral stairs to a high dome of his house in which there was a single small round window that looked forth on the constellations. The window was set in the top of the dome; but

Namirrha had contrived, by means of his magic, that one entering by the last spiral of the stairs would suddenly seem to descend rather than climb, and, reaching the last step, would peer downward through the window while stars passed under him in a giddy gulf. There, kneeling, Namirrha touched a secret spring in the marble, and the circular pane slid back without sound. Then, lying prone on the interior of the dome, with his face over the abyss, and his long beard trailing stiffly into space, he whispered a pre-human rune, and held speech with certain entities who belonged neither to Hell nor the mundane elements, and were more fearsome to invoke than the infernal genii or the devils of earth, air, water, and flame. With them he made his contract, defying Thasaidon's will, while the air curdled about him with their voices, and rime gathered palely on his sable beard from the cold that was wrought by their breathing as they leaned earthward.

Laggard and loth was the awakening of Zotulla from his wine; and quickly, ere he opened his eyes, the daylight was poisoned for him by the thought of that invitation which he feared to accept or decline. But he spoke to Obexah, saying:

“Who, after all, is this wizardly dog, that I should obey his summons like a beggar called in from the street by some haughty lord?”

Obexah, a golden-skinned and oblique-eyed girl from Uccastrog, Isle of the Torturers, eyed the emperor subtly, and said:

“O Zotulla, it is yours to accept or refuse, as you deem fitting. And truly, it is a small matter for the lord of Ummaos and all Xylac, whether to go or to stay, since naught can impugn his sovereignty. Therefore, were it not as well to go?” For Obexah, though fearful of the wizard, was curious regarding that devil-built house of which so little was known; and likewise, in the manner of women, she wished to behold the famed

Namirrha, whose mien and appearance were still but a far-brought legend in Ummaos.

“There is something in what you say,” admitted Zotulla. “But an emperor, in his conduct, must always consider the public good; and there are matters of state involved, which a woman can scarcely be expected to understand.”

So, later in the forenoon, after an ample and well-irrigated breakfast, he called his chamberlains and courtiers about him and took counsel with them. And some advised him to ignore the invitation of Namirrha; and others held that the invitation be accepted, lest a graver evil than the trampling of ghostly hooves be sent upon the palace and the city.

Then Zotulla called the many priesthoods before him in a body, and sought to resummon the wizards and soothsayers who had fled privily in the night. Among all the latter, there was none who answered the crying of his name through Ummaos; and this aroused a certain wonder. But the priests came in a greater number than before, and thronged the hall of audience so that the paunches of the foremost were straightened against the imperial dais and the buttocks of the hindmost were flattened on the rear walls and pillars. And Zotulla debated with them the matter of acceptance or refusal. And the priests argued, as before, that Namirrha was nowhere else concerned with the sending ; and his invitation, they said, portended no harm nor bale to the emperor; and it was plain, from the terms of the message, that an oracle would be imparted to Zotulla by the wizard; and this oracle, if Namirrha were a true archimage, would confirm their own holy wisdom and reestablish the divine source of the sending; and the gods of Xylac would again be glorified.

Then, having heard the pronouncement of the priests, the emperor instructed his treasurers to load them down with new offerings; and calling

unctuously upon Zotulla and all his household the vicarious blessings of the several gods, the priests departed. And the day wore on, and the sun passed its meridian, falling slowly beyond Ummaos through the spaces of the afternoon that were floored with sea-ending deserts. And still Zotulla was irresolute; and he called his wine-bearers, bidding them pour for him the strongest and most magistral of their vintages; but in the wine he found neither certitude nor decision.

Sitting still on his throne in the hall of audience, he heard, toward middle afternoon, a mighty and clamorous outcry that arose at the palace portals. There were deep wailings of men and the shrillings of eunuchs and women, as if terror passed from tongue to tongue, invading the halls and apartments. And the fearful clamor spread throughout all the palace, and Zotulla, rousing from the lethargy of wine, was about to send his attendants to inquire the cause.

Then, into the hall, there filed an array of tall mummies, clad in royal cerements of purple and scarlet, and wearing gold crowns on their withered craniums. And after them, like servitors, came gigantic skeletons who wore loin-cloths of nacarat orange and about whose upper skulls, from brow to crown, live serpents of banded saffron and ebon had wrapped themselves for head-dresses. And the mummies bowed before Zotulla, saying with thin, sere voices:

“We, who were kings of the wide realm of Tasuun aforetime, have been sent as a guard of honor for the emperor Zotulla, to attend him as is befitting when he goes forth to the feast prepared by Namirrha.”

Then with dry clickings of their teeth, and whistlings as of air through screens of fretted ivory, the skeletons spoke:

“We, who were giant warriors of a race forgotten, have also been sent by Namirrha, so that the emperor’s household, following him to the feast,

should be guarded from all peril and should fare forth in such pageantry as is meet and proper.”

Witnessing these prodigies, the wine-bearers and other attendants cowered about the imperial dais or hid behind the pillars, while Zotulla, with pupils swimming starkly in a bloodshot white, with face bloated and ghastly pale, sat frozen on his throne and could utter no word in reply to the ministers of Namirrha.

Then, coming forward, the mummies said in dusty accents: “All is made ready, and the feast awaits the arrival of Zotulla.” And the cerements of the mummies stirred and fell open at the bosom, and small rodent monsters, brown as bitumen, eyed as with accursed rubies, reared forth from the eaten hearts of the mummies like rats from their holes and chittered shrilly in human speech, repeating the words. The skeletons in turn took up the solemn sentence; and the black and saffron serpents hissed it from their skulls; and the words were repeated lastly in baleful rumblings by certain furry creatures of dubious form, hitherto unseen by Zotulla, who sat behind the ribs of the skeletons as if in cages of white wicker.

Like a dreamer who obeys the doom of dreams, the emperor rose from his throne and went forward, and the mummies surrounded him like an escort. And each of the skeletons drew from the reddish-yellow folds of his loin-cloth a curiously pierced archaic flute of silver; and all began a sweet and evil and deathly fluting as the emperor went out through the halls of the palace. A fatal spell was in the music: for the chamberlains, the women, the guards, the eunuchs, and all members of Zotulla’s household even to the cooks and scullions, were drawn like a procession of night-walkers from the rooms and alcoves in which they had vainly hidden themselves; and marshaled by the flutists, they followed after Zotulla. A strange thing it was to behold this mighty company of people, going forth in the slanted sunlight

toward Namirrha's house, with a cortège of dead kings about them, and the blown breath of skeletons thrilling eldritchly in the silver flutes. And little was Zotulla comforted when he found the girl Obexah at his side, moving, as he, in a thralldom of involitant horror, with the rest of his women close behind.

Coming to the open portals of Namirrha's house, the emperor saw that they were guarded by great crimson-wattled things, half dragon, half man, who bowed before him, sweeping their wattles like bloody besoms on the flags of dark onyx. And the emperor passed with Obexah between the louting monsters, with the mummies, the skeletons and his own people behind him in strange pageant, and entered a vast and multicolumned hall, where the daylight, following timidly, was drowned by the baleful arrogant blaze of a thousand lamps.

Even amid his horror, Zotulla marvelled at the vastness of the chamber, which he could hardly reconcile with the mansion's outer length and height and breadth, though these indeed were of most palatial amplitude. For it seemed that he gazed down great avenues of topless pillars, and vistas of tables laden with piled-up viands and thronged urns of wine, that stretched away before him into luminous distance and gloom as of starless night.

In the wide intervals between the tables, the familiars of Namirrha and his other servants went to and fro incessantly, as if a fantasmagoria of ill dreams were embodied before the emperor. Kingly cadavers in robes of time-rotted brocade, with worms seething in their eye-pits, poured a blood-like wine into cups of the opalescent horn of unicorns. Lamias, trident-tailed, and four-breasted chimeras, came in with fuming platters lifted high by their brazen claws. Dog-headed devils, tongued with lolling flames, ran forward to offer themselves as ushers for the company. And before Zotulla and Obexah, there appeared a curious being with the full-fleshed lower

limbs and hips of a great black woman and the clean-picked bones of some titanic ape from thereupward.

Verily, it seemed to Zotulla that they had gone a long way into some malignly litten cavern of Hell, when they came to that perspective of tables and columns down which the monster had led them. Here, at the room's end, apart from the rest, was a table at which Namirrha sat alone, with the flames of the seven horse-skull lamps burning restlessly behind him, and the mailed black image of Thasaidon towering from the altar of jet at his right hand. And a little aside from the altar, a diamond mirror was upborne by the claws of iron basilisks.

Namirrha rose to greet them, observing a solemn and funereal courtesy. His eyes were bleak and cold as distant stars in the hollows wrought by strange fearful vigils. His lips were like a pale-red seal on a shut parchment of doom. His beard flowed stiffly in black-anointed banded locks across the bosom of his vermillion robe, like a mass of straight black serpents. Zotulla felt the blood pause and thicken about his heart, as if congealing into ice. And Obexah, peering beneath lowered lids, was abashed and frightened by the visible horror that invested this man and hung upon him even as royalty upon a king. But amid her fear, she found room to wonder what manner of man he was in his intercourse with women.

"I bid you welcome, O Zotulla, to such hospitality as is mine to offer," said Namirrha, with the iron ringing of some hidden funereal bell deep down in his hollow voice. "Prithee, be seated at my table."

Zotulla saw that a chair of ebony had been placed for him opposite Namirrha; and another chair, less stately and imperial, had been placed at the left hand for Obexah. And the twain seated themselves; and Zotulla saw that his people were sitting likewise at other tables throughout the huge hall,

with the frightful servants of Namirrha waiting upon them busily, like devils attending the damned.

Then Zotulla perceived that a dark and corpse-like hand was pouring wine for him in a crystal cup; and upon the hand was the signet-ring of the emperors of Xylac, set with a monstrous fire-opal in the mouth of a golden bat: even such a ring as Zotulla wore perpetually on his index-finger. And, turning, he beheld at his right hand a figure that bore the likeness of his father, Pithaim, after the poison of the adder, spreading through his limbs, had left behind it the purple bloating of death. And Zotulla, who had caused the adder to be placed in the bed of Pithaim, cowered in his seat and trembled with a guilty fear. And the thing that wore the similtude of Pithaim, whether corpse or an image wrought by Namirrha's enchantment, came and went at Zotulla's elbow, waiting upon him with stark, black, swollen fingers that never fumbled. Horribly he was aware of its bulging, unregarding eyes, and its livid purple mouth that was locked in a rigor of mortal silence, and the spotted adder that peered at intervals with chill orbs from its heavy-folded sleeve as it leaned beside him to replenish his cup or to serve him with meat. And dimly, through the icy mist of his terror, the emperor beheld the shadowy-armored shape, like a moving replica of the still, grim statue of Thasaidon, which Namirrha had reared up in his blasphemy to perform the same office for himself. And vaguely, without comprehension, he saw the dreadful ministrant that hovered beside Obexah: a flayed and eyeless corpse in the image of her first lover, a boy from Cyntrom who had been cast ashore in shipwreck on the Isle of the Torturers. There Obexah had found him, lying behind the ebbing wave, and reviving the boy, she had hidden him awhile in a secret cave for her own pleasure, and had brought him food and drink. Later, wearying, she had betrayed him

to the Torturers, and had taken a new delight in the various pangs and ordeals inflicted upon him before death by that cruel, pernicious people.

“Drink,” said Namirrha, quaffing a strange wine that was red and dark as if with disastrous sunsets of lost years. And Zotulla and Obexah drank the wine, feeling no warmth in their veins thereafter, but a chill as of hemlock mounting slowly toward the heart.

“Verily, ’tis a good wine,” said Namirrha, “and a proper one in which to toast the furthering of our acquaintance: for it was buried long ago with the royal dead, in amphorae of somber jasper shapen like funeral urns; and my ghouls found it, whenas they came to dig in Tasuun.”

Now it seemed that the tongue of Zotulla froze in his mouth, as a mandrake freezes in the rime-bound soil of winter; and he found no reply to Namirrha’s courtesy.

“Prithee, make trial of this meat,” quoth Namirrha, “for it is very choice, being the flesh of that boar which the Torturers of Uccastrog are wont to pasture on the well-minced leavings of their wheels and racks; and, moreover, my cooks have spiced it with the powerful balsams of the tomb, and have farced it with the hearts of adders and the tongues of black cobras.”

Naught could the emperor say; and even Obexah was silent, being sorely troubled in her turpitude by the presence of that flayed and piteous thing which had the likeness of her lover from Cyntrom. And the dread of the necromancer grew prodigiously; for his knowledge of this old, forgotten crime, and the raising of the fantasm, appeared to her a more baleful magic than all else.

“Now, I fear,” said Namirrha, “that you find the meat devoid of savor, and the wine without fire. So, to enliven our feasting, I shall call forth my singers and my musicians.”

He spoke a word unknown to Zotulla or Obexah, which sounded throughout the mighty hall as if a thousand voices in turn had taken it up and prolonged it. Anon there appeared the singers, who were she-ghouls with shaven bodies and hairy shanks, and long yellow tushes full of shredded carrion curving across their chaps from mouths that fawned hyena-wise on the company. Behind them entered the musicians, some of whom were male devils pacing erect on the hind-quarters of sable stallions and plucking with the fingers of white apes at lyres of the bone and sinew of cannibals from Naat; and others were pied satyrs puffing their goatish cheeks at hautboys formed from the bosom-skin of Negro queens and the horn of rhinoceri.

They bowed before Namirrha with grotesque ceremony. Then, without delay, the she-ghouls began a most dolorous and execrable howling, as of jackals that have sniffed their carrion; and the satyrs and devils played a lament that was like the moaning of desert-born winds through forsaken palace harems. And Zotulla shivered, for the singing filled his marrow with ice, and the music left in his heart a desolation as of empires fallen and trod under by the iron-shod hooves of time. Ever, amid that evil music, he seemed to hear the sifting of sand across withered gardens, and the windy rustling of rotted silks upon couches of bygone luxury, and the hissing of coiled serpents from the low fusts of shattered columns. And the glory that had been Ummaos seemed to pass away like the blown pillars of the simoom.

“Now that was a brave tune,” said Namirrha when the music ceased and the she-ghouls no longer howled. “But verily I fear that you find my entertainment somewhat dull. Therefore, my dancers shall dance for you.”

He turned toward the great hall, and described in the air an enigmatic sign with the fingers of his right hand. In answer to the sign, a hueless mist

came down from the high roof and hid the room like a fallen curtain for a brief interim. There was a babel of sounds, confused and muffled, beyond the curtain, and a crying of voices faint as if with distance.

Then, dreadfully, the vapor rolled away, and Zotulla saw that the leaden tables had gone. In the wide interspaces of the columns, his palace-inmates, the chamberlains, the eunuchs, the courtiers and odalisques and all the others, lay trussed with thongs on the floor, like so many fowls of glorious plumage. Above them, in time to a music made by the lyrists and flutists of the necromancer, a troupe of skeletons pirouetted with light clickings of their toe-bones; and a rout of mummies bowed stiffly; and others of Namirrha's creatures moved with mysterious caperings. To and fro they leapt on the bodies of the emperor's people, in the paces of an evil saraband. At every step they grew taller and heavier, till the saltant mummies were as the mummies of Anakim, and the skeletons were boned as colossi; and louder the music rose, drowning the faint cries of Zotulla's people. And huger still became the dancers, towering far into vaulted shadow among the vast columns, with thudding feet that wrought thunder in the room; and those whereon they danced were as grapes trampled for a vintage in autumn; and the floor ran deep with a sanguine must.

As a man drowning in a noisome, night-bound fen, the emperor heard the voice of Namirrha:

"It would seem that my dancers please you not. So now I shall present you a most royal spectacle. Arise and follow me, for the spectacle is one that requires an empire for its stage."

Zotulla and Obexah rose from their chairs in the fashion of night-walkers. Giving no backward glance at their ministering phantoms, or the hall where the dancers bounded, they followed Namirrha to an alcove beyond the altar of Thasaidon. Thence, by the upward-coiling stairways,

they came at length to a broad high balcony that faced Zotulla's palace and looked forth above the city roofs toward the bourn of sunset.

It seemed that several hours had gone by in that hellish feasting and entertainment; for the day was near to its close, and the sun, which had fallen from sight behind the imperial palace, was barring the vast heavens with bloody rays.

"Behold," said Namirrha, adding a strange vocable to which the stone of the edifice resounded like a beaten gong.

The balcony pitched a little, and Zotulla, looking over the balustrade, beheld the roofs of Ummaos lessen and sink beneath him. It seemed that the balcony flew skyward to a prodigious height, and he peered down across the domes of his own palace, upon the houses, the tilled fields and the desert beyond, and the huge sun brought low on the desert's verge. And Zotulla grew giddy; and the chill airs of the upper heavens blew upon him. But Namirrha spoke another word, and the balcony ceased to ascend.

"Look well," said the necromancer, "on the empire that was yours, but shall be yours no longer." Then, with arms outstretched toward the sunset, he called aloud the twelve names that were perdition to utter, and after them the tremendous invocation: Gna padambis devompra thungis furidor avoragomon.

Instantly, it seemed that great ebon clouds of thunder beetled against the sun. Lining the horizon, the clouds took the form of colossal monsters with heads and members somewhat resembling those of stallions. Rearing terribly, they trod down the sun like an extinguished ember; and racing as if in some hippodrome of Titans, they rose higher and vaster, coming towards Ummaos. Deep, calamitous rumblings preceded them, and the earth shook visibly, till Zotulla saw that these were not immaterial clouds, but actual living forms that had come forth to tread the world in macrocosmic

vastness. Throwing their shadows for many leagues before them, the coursers charged as if devil-ridden into Xylac, and their feet descended like falling mountain crags upon far oases and towns of the outer wastes.

Like a many-turreted storm they came, and it seemed that the world shrank gulfward, tilting beneath the weight. Still as a man enchanted into marble, Zotulla stood and beheld the ruining that was wrought on his empire. And closer drew the gigantic stallions, racing with inconceivable speed, and louder was the thundering of their footfalls, that now began to blot the green fields and fruited orchards lying for many miles to the west of Ummaos. And the shadow of the stallions climbed like an evil gloom of eclipse, till it covered Ummaos; and looking up, the emperor saw their eyes halfway between earth and zenith, like baleful suns that glare down from soaring cumuli.

Then, in the thickening gloom, above that insupportable thunder, he heard the voice of Namirrha, crying in mad triumph:

“Know, Zotulla, that I have called up the coursers of Thamogorgos, lord of the abyss. And the coursers will tread your empire down, even as your palfrey trod and trampled in former time a beggar-boy named Narthos. And learn also that I, Namirrha, was that boy.” And the eyes of Namirrha, filled with a vainglory of madness and bale, burned like malign, disastrous stars at the hour of their culmination.

To Zotulla, wholly mazed with the horror and tumult, the necromancer’s words were no more than shrill, shrieked overtones of the tempest of doom; and he understood them not. Tremendously, with a rending of staunch-built roofs, and an instant cleavage and crumbling down of mighty masonries, the hooves descended upon Ummaos. Fair temple-domes were pashed like shells of the haliotis, and haughty mansions were broken and stamped into the ground even as gourds; and house by house the city was trampled flat

with a crashing as of worlds beaten into chaos. Far below, in the darkened streets, men and camels fled like scurrying emmets but could not escape. And implacably the hooves rose and fell, till ruin was upon half the city, and night was over all. The palace of Zotulla was trodden under, and now the forelegs of the coursers loomed level with Namirrha's balcony, and their heads towered awfully above. It seemed that they would rear and trample down the necromancer's house; but at that moment they parted to left and right, and a dolorous glimmering came from the low sunset; and the coursers went on, treading under them that portion of Ummaos which lay to the eastward. And Zotulla and Obexah and Namirrha looked down on the city's fragments as on a shard-strewn midden, and heard the cataclysmic clamor of the hooves departing toward eastern Xylac.

"Now that was a goodly spectacle," quoth Namirrha. Then, turning to the emperor, he added malignly: "Think not that I have done with thee, however, or that doom is yet consummate."

It seemed that the balcony had fallen to its former elevation, which was still a lofty vantage above the sharded ruins. And Namirrha plucked the emperor by the arm and led him from the balcony to an inner chamber, while Obexah followed mutely. The emperor's heart was crushed within him by the trampling of such calamities, and despair weighed upon him like a foul incubus on the shoulders of a man lost in some land of accursed night. And he knew not that he had been parted from Obexah on the threshold of the chamber, and that certain of Namirrha's creatures, appearing like shadows, had compelled the girl to go downward with them by the stairs, and had stifled her outcries with their rotten cerements as they went.

The chamber was one that Namirrha used for his most unhallowed rites and alchemies. The rays of the lamps that illumed it were saffron-red like

the spilt ichor of devils, and they flowed on aludels and crucibles and black athanors and alembics whereof the purpose was hardly to be named by mortal man. The sorcerer heated in one of the alembics a dark liquid full of star-cold lights, while Zotulla looked on unheeding. And when the liquid bubbled and sent forth a spiral vapor, Namirrha distilled it into goblets of gold-rimmed iron, and gave one of the goblets to Zotulla and retained the other himself. And he said to Zotulla with a stern imperative voice: "I bid thee quaff this liquor."

Zotulla, fearing that the draft was poison, hesitated. And the necromancer regarded him with a lethal gaze, and cried loudly: "Fearest thou to do as I?" and therewith he set the goblet to his lips.

So the emperor drank the draft, constrained as if by the bidding of some angel of death, and a darkness fell upon his senses. But, ere the darkness grew complete, he saw that Namirrha had drained his own goblet.

Then, with unspeakable agonies, it seemed that the emperor died; and his soul float free; and again he saw the chamber, though with bodiless eyes. And discarnate he stood in the saffron-crimson light, with his body lying as if dead on the floor beside him, and near it the prone body of Namirrha and the two fallen goblets.

Standing thus, he beheld a strange thing: for anon his own body stirred and arose, while that of the necromancer remained still as death. And Zotulla looked at his own lineaments and his figure in its short cloak of azure samite sewn with black pearls and balas-rubies; and the body lived before him, though with eyes that held a darker fire and a deeper evil than was their wont. Then, without corporeal ears, Zotulla heard the figure speak, and the voice was the strong, arrogant voice of Namirrha, saying:

"Follow me, O houseless phantom, and do in all things as I enjoin thee."

Like an unseen shadow, Zotulla followed the wizard, and the twain went downward by the stairs to the great banquet hall. They came to the altar of Thasaidon and the mailed image, with the seven horse-skull lamps burning before it as formerly. Upon the altar, Zotulla's beloved leman Obexah, who alone of all women had power to stir his sated heart, was lying bound with thongs at Thasaidon's feet. But the hall beyond was deserted, and nothing remained of that Saturnalia of doom except the fruit of the treading, which had flowed together in dark pools among the columns.

Namirrha, using the emperor's body in all ways for his own, paused before the dark eidolon; and he said to the spirit of Zotulla: "Be imprisoned in this image, without power to free thyself or to stir in any wise."

Being wholly obedient to the will of the necromancer, the soul of Zotulla was embodied in the statue, and he felt its cold, gigantic armor about him like a straight sarcophagus, and he peered forth immovably from the bleak eyes that were overhung by its carven helmet.

Gazing thus, he beheld the change that had come on his own body through the sorcerous possession of Namirrha: for below the short azure cloak, the legs had turned suddenly to the hind legs of a black stallion, with hooves that glowed redly as if heated by infernal fires. And even as Zotulla watched this prodigy, the hooves glowed white and incandescent, and fumes mounted from the floor beneath them.

Then, on the black altar, the hybrid abomination came pacing haughtily toward Obexah, and smoking footprints appeared behind it as it came. Pausing beside the girl, who lay supine and helpless regarding it with eyes that were pools of frozen horror, it raised one glowing hoof and set the hoof on her naked bosom between the small breast-cups of golden filigree begemmed with rubies. And the girl screamed beneath that atrocious treading as the soul of one newly damned might scream in hell; and the

hoof glared with intolerable brilliance, as if freshly plucked from a furnace wherein the weapons of demons were forged.

At that moment, in the cowed and crushed and sodden shade of the emperor Zotulla, close-locked within the adamantine image, there awoke the manhood that had slumbered unaroused before the ruining of his empire and the trampling of his retinue. Immediately a great abhorrence and a high wrath were alive in his soul, and mightily he longed for his own right arm to serve him, and a sword in his right hand.

Then it seemed that a voice spoke within him, chill and bleak and awful, and as if uttered inwardly by the statue itself. And the voice said: "I am Thasaidon, lord of the seven hells beneath the earth, and the hells of man's heart above the earth, which are seven times seven. For the moment, O Zotulla, my power is become thine for the sake of a mutual vengeance. Be one in all ways with the statue that has my likeness, even as the soul is one with the flesh. Behold! there is a mace of adamant in thy right hand. Lift up the mace, and smite."

Zotulla was aware of a great power within him, and giant thews about him that thrilled with the power and responded agilely to his will. He felt in his mailed right hand the haft of the huge spiky-headed mace; and though the mace was beyond the lifting of any man in mortal flesh, it seemed no more than a goodly weight to Zotulla. Then, rearing he mace like a warrior in battle, he struck down with one crashing blow the impious thing that wore his own rightful flesh united with the legs and hooves of a demon courser. And the thing crumpled swiftly down and lay with the brain spreading pulpily from its shattered skull on the shining jet. And the legs twitched a little and then grew still; and the hooves glowed from a fiery, blinding white to the redness of red-hot iron, cooling slowly.

For a space there was no sound, other than the shrill screaming of the girl Obexah, mad with pain and the terror of those prodigies which she had beheld. Then in the soul of Zotulla, grown sick with that screaming, the chill, awful voice of Thasaidon spoke again:

“Go free, for there is nothing more for thee to do.” So the spirit of Zotulla passed from the image of Thasaidon and found in the wide air the freedom of nothingness and oblivion.

But the end was not yet for Namirrha, whose mad, arrogant soul had been loosened from Zotulla’s body by the blow, and had returned darkly, not in the manner planned by the magician, to its own body lying in the room of accursed rites and forbidden transmigrations. There Namirrha woke anon, with a dire confusion in his mind, and a partial forgetfulness: for the curse of Thasaidon was upon him now because of his blasphemies.

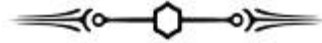
Nothing was clear in his thought except a malign, exorbitant longing for revenge; but the reason thereof, and the object, were as doubtful shadows. And still prompted by that obscure animus, he arose; and girding to his side an enchanted sword with runic sapphires and opals in the hilt, he descended the stairs and came again to the altar of Thasaidon, where the mailed statue stood as impassive as before, with the poised mace in its immovable right hand, and below it, on the altar, the double sacrifice.

A veil of weird darkness was upon the senses of Namirrha, and he saw not the stallion-legged horror that lay dead with slowly blackening hooves; and he heard not the moaning of the girl Obexah, who still lived beside it. But his eyes were drawn by the diamond mirror that was upheld in the claws of black iron basilisks beyond the altar; and going to the mirror, he saw therein a face that he knew no longer for his own. And because his eyes were shadowed and his brain filled with the shifting webs of delusion, he took the face for that of the emperor Zotulla. Insatiable as Hell’s own flame,

his old hatred rose within him; and he drew the enchanted sword and began to hew therewith at the reflection. Sometimes, because of the curse laid upon him, and the impious transmigration which he had performed, he thought himself Zotulla warring with the necromancer; and again, in the shiftings of his madness, he was Namirrha smiting at the emperor; and then, without name, he fought a nameless foe. And soon the sorcerous blade, though tempered with formidable spells, was broken close to the hilt, and Namirrha beheld the image still unharmed. Then, howling aloud the half-forgotten runes of a most tremendous curse, made invalid through his own forgettings, he hammered still with the heavy sword-hilt on the mirror, till the runic sapphires and opals cracked in the hilt and fell away at his feet in little fragments.

Obexah, dying on the altar, saw Namirrha battling with his image, and the spectacle moved her to mad laughter like the pealing of bells of ruined crystal. And above her laughter, and above the cursings of Namirrha, there came anon like the rumbling of a swift-driven storm the thunder made by the macrocosmic stallions of Thamogorgos, returning gulfward through Xylac over Ummaos, to trample down the one house that they had spared aforetime.

The Last Hieroglyph



The world itself, in the end, shall be turned to a round cipher.

OLD PROPHECY OF ZOTHIQUE

NUSHAIN THE ASTROLOGER had studied the circling orbs of night from many far-separated regions, and had cast, with such skill as he was able to command, the horoscopes of a myriad men, women and children. From city to city, from realm to realm he had gone, abiding briefly in any place: for often the local magistrates had banished him as a common charlatan; or otherwise, in due time, his consultants had discovered the error of his predictions and had fallen away from him. Sometimes he went hungry and shabby; and small honor was paid to him anywhere. The sole companions of his precarious fortunes were a wretched mongrel dog that had somehow attached itself to him in the desert town of Zul-Bha-Sair, and a mute, one-eyed negro whom he had bought very cheaply on Yoros. He had named the dog Ansarath, after the canine star, and had called the Negro Mouzda, which was a word signifying darkness.

In the course of his prolonged itinerations, the astrologer came to Xylac and made his abode in its capital, Ummaos, which had been built above the shards of an elder city of the same name, long since destroyed by a sorcerer's wrath. Here Nushain lodged with Ansarath and Mouzda in a half-ruinous attic of a rotting tenement; and from the tenement's roof, Nushain was wont to observe the positions and movements of the sidereal bodies on evenings not obscured by the fumes of the city. At intervals some housewife or jade, some porter or huckster or petty merchant, would climb the

decaying stairs to his chamber, and would pay him a small sum for the nativity which he plotted with immense care by the aid of his tattered books of astrological science.

When, as often occurred, he found himself still at a loss regarding the significance of some heavenly conjunction or opposition after poring over his books, he would consult Ansarath, and would draw profound auguries from the variable motions of the dog's mangy tail or his actions in searching for fleas. Certain of these divinations were fulfilled, to the considerable benefit of Nushain's renown in Ummaos. People came to him more freely and frequently, hearing that he was a soothsayer of some note; and, moreover, he was immune from prosecution, owing to the liberal laws of Xylac, which permitted all the sorcerous and mantic arts.

It seemed, for the first time, that the dark planets of his fate were yielding to auspicious stars. For this fortune, and the coins which accrued thereby to his purse, he gave thanks to Vergama who, throughout the whole continent of Zothique, was deemed the most powerful and mysterious of the genii, and was thought to rule over the heavens as well as the earth.

On a summer night, when the stars were strewn thickly like a firey sand on the black azure vault, Nushain went up to the roof of his lodging-place. As was often his custom, he took with him the negro Mouzda, whose one eye possessed a miraculous sharpness and had served well, on many occasions, to supplement the astrologer's own rather near-sighted vision. Through a well codified system of signs and gestures, the mute was able to communicate the result of his observations to Nushain.

On this night the constellation of the Great Dog, which had presided over Nushain's birth, was ascendant in the east. Regarding it closely, the dim eyes of the astrologer were troubled by a sense of something unfamiliar in its configuration. He could not determine the precise character of the

change till Mouzda, who evinced much excitement, called his attention to three new stars of the second magnitude which had appeared in close proximity to the Dog's hindquarters. These remarkable novae, which Nushain could discern only as three reddish blurs, formed a small equilateral triangle. Nushain and Mouzda were both certain that they had not been visible on any previous evening.

"By Vergama, this is a strange thing," swore the astrologer, filled with amazement and dumbfoundment. He began to compute the problematic influence of the novae on his future reading of the heavens, and perceived at once that they would exert, according to the law of astral emanations, a modifying effect on his own destiny, which had been so largely controlled by the Dog.

He could not, however, without consulting his books and tables, decide the particular trend and import of this supervening influence; though he felt sure that it was most momentous, whether for his bale or welfare. Leaving Mouzda to watch the heavens for other prodigies, he descended at once to his attic. There, after collating the opinions of several old-time astrologers on the power exerted by novae, he began to recast his own horoscope. Painfully and with much agitation he labored throughout the night, and did not finish his figurings till the dawn came to mix a deathly grayness with the yellow light of the candles.

There was, it seemed, but one possible interpretation of the altered heavens. The appearance of the triangle of novae in conjunction with the Dog signified clearly that Nushain was to start ere long on an unpremeditated journey which would involve the transit of no less than three elements. Mouzda and Ansarath were to accompany him; and three guides, appearing successively, at the proper times, would lead him toward a destined goal. So much his calculations had revealed, but no more: there

was nothing to foretell whether the journey would prove auspicious or disastrous, nothing to indicate its bourn, purpose or direction.

The astrologer was much disturbed by this somewhat singular and equivocal augury. He was ill-pleased by the prospect of an imminent journey, for he did not wish to leave Ummaos, among whose credulous people he had begun to establish himself not without success. Moreover, a strong apprehension was roused within him by the oddly manifold nature and veiled outcome of the journey. All this, he felt, was suggestive of the workings of some occult and perhaps sinister providence; and surely it was no common traveling which would take him through three elements and would require a triple guidance.

During the nights that followed, he and Mouzda watched the mysterious novae as they went over toward the west behind the bright-flaming Dog. And he puzzled interminably over his charts and volumes hoping to discover some error in the reading he had made. But always, in the end, he was compelled to the same interpretation.

More and more, as time went on, he was troubled by the thought of that unwelcome and mysterious journey which he must make. He continued to prosper in Ummaos, and it seemed that there was no conceivable reason for his departure from that city. He was as one who awaited a dark and secret summons; not knowing whence it would come, nor at what hour. Throughout the days, he scanned with fearful anxiety the faces of his visitors, deeming that the first of the three star-predicted guides might arrive unheralded and unrecognized among them.

Mouzda and the dog Ansarath, with the intuition of dumb things, were sensible of the weird uneasiness felt by their master. They shared it palpably, the negro showing his apprehension by wild and demoniac grimaces, and the dog crouching under the astrologer's table or prowling

restlessly to and fro with his half-hairless tail between his legs. Such behavior, in its turn, served to reconfirm the inquietude of Nushain, who deemed it a bad omen.

On a certain evening, Nushain pored for the fiftieth time over his horoscope, which he had drawn with sundry-colored inks on a sheet of papyrus. He was much startled when, on the blank lower margin of the sheet, he saw a curious character which was no part of his own scribbling. The character was a hieroglyph written in dark bituminous brown, and seeming to represent a mummy whose shroudings were loosened about the legs and whose feet were set in the posture of a long stride. It was facing toward that quarter of the chart where stood the sign indicating the Great Dog, which, in Zothique, was a House of the zodiac.

Nushain's surprise turned to a sort of trepidation as he studied the hieroglyph. He knew that the margin of the chart had been wholly clear on the previous night; and during the past day he had not left the attic at any time. Mouzda, he felt sure, would never have dared to touch the chart; and, moreover, the negro was little skilled in writing. Among the various inks employed by Nushain, there was none that resembled the sullen brown of the character, which seemed to stand out in a sad relief on the white papyrus.

Nushain felt the alarm of one who confronts a sinister and unexplainable apparition. No human hand, surely, had inscribed the mummy-shapen character, like the sign of a strange outer planet about to invade the Houses of his horoscope. Here, as in the advent of the three novae, an occult agency was suggested. Vainly, for many hours, he sought to unriddle the mystery: but in all his books there was naught to enlighten him; for this thing, it seemed, was wholly without precedent in astrology.

During the next day he was busied from morn till eve with the plotting of those destinies ordained by the heavens for certain people of Ummaos. After completing the calculations with his usual toilsome care, he unrolled his own chart once more, albeit with trembling fingers. An eeriness that was nigh to panic seized him when he saw that the brown hieroglyph no longer stood on the margin, but was now placed like a striding figure in one of the lower Houses, where it still fronted toward the Dog, as if advancing on that ascendant sign.

Henceforth the astrologer was fevered with the awe and curiosity of one who watches a fatal but inscrutable portent. Never, during the hours that he pondered above it, was there any change in the intruding character; and yet, on each successive evening when he took out the chart, he saw that the mummy had strode upward into a higher House, drawing always nearer to the House of the Dog...

There came a time when the figure stood on the Dog's threshold. Portentous with mystery and menace that were still beyond the astrologer's divining, it seemed to wait while the night wore on and was shot through with the grey weft of dawn. Then, overworn with his prolonged studies and vigils, Nushain slept in his chair. Without the troubling of any dream he slept; and Mouzda was careful not to disturb him; and no visitors came to the attic on that day. So the morn and the noon and the afternoon went over, and their going was unheeded by Nushain.

He was awakened at eve by the loud and dolorous howling of Ansarath, which appeared to issue from the room's farthest corner. Confusedly, ere he opened his eyes, he became aware of an odor of bitter spices and piercing natron. Then, with the dim webs of sleep not wholly swept from his vision, he beheld, by the yellowy tapers that Mouzda had lighted, a tall, mummy-like form that waited in silence beside him. The head, arms and body of the

shape were wound closely with bitumen-colored cerements; but the folds were loosened from the hips downward, and the figure stood like a walker, with one brown, withered foot in advance of its fellow.

Terror quickened in Nushain's heart, and it came to him that the shrouded shape, whether lich or phantom, resembled the weird, invasive hieroglyph that had passed from House to House through the chart of his destiny. Then, from the thick swathings of the apparition, a voice issued indistinctly, saying: "Prepare yourself, O Nushain, for I am the first guide of that journey which was foretold to you by the stars."

Ansarith, cowering beneath the astrologer's bed, was still howling his fear of the visitant; and Nushain saw that Mouzda had tried to conceal himself in company with the dog. Though a chill as of imminent death was upon him, and he deemed the apparition to be death itself, Nushain arose from the chair with that dignity proper to an astrologer, which he had maintained through all the vicissitudes of his lifetime. He called Mouzda and Ansarith from their hiding-place, and the two obeyed him, though with many cringings before the dark, muffled mummy.

With the comrades of his fortune behind him, Nushain turned to the visitant. "I am ready," he said, in a voice whose quavering was almost imperceptible. "But I would like with me certain of my belongings."

The mummy shook his mobled head. "It were well to take with you nothing but your horoscope: for this alone shall you retain in the end."

Nushain stooped above the table on which he had left his nativity. Before he began to roll the open papyrus, he noticed that the hieroglyph of the mummy had vanished. It was as if the written symbol, after moving athwart his horoscope, had materialized itself in the figure that now attended him. But on the chart's nether margin, in remote opposition to the Dog, was the sea-blue hieroglyph of a quaint merman with carp-like tail and head half

human, half apish; and behind the merman was the black hieroglyph of a small barge.

Nushain's fear, for a moment, was subdued by wonder. But he rolled the chart carefully, and stood holding it in his right hand.

"Come," said the guide. "Your time is brief, and you must pass through the three elements that guard the dwelling place of Vergama from unseasonable intrusion."

These words, in a measure, confirmed the astrologer's divinations. But the mystery of his future fate was in no wise lightened by the intimation that he must enter, presumably at the journey's end, the dim House of that being called Vergama, whom some considered the most secret of all the gods, and others, the most cryptical of demons. In all the lands of Zothique, there were rumors and fables regarding Vergama; but these were wholly diverse and contradictory, except in their common attribution of almost omnipotent powers to this entity. No man knew the situation of his abode; but it was believed that vast multitudes of people had entered it during the centuries and millenniums, and that none had returned therefrom.

Ofttimes had Nushain called upon the name of Vergama, swearing or protesting thereby as men are wont to do by the cognomens of their shrouded lords. But now, hearing the name from the lips of his macabre visitor, he was filled with the darkest and most eerie apprehensions. He sought to subdue these feelings, and to resign himself to the manifest will of the stars. With Mouzda and Ansarath at his heels, he followed the striding mummy, which seemed little hampered, if at all, by its trailing cerements.

With one regretful backward glance at his littered books and papers, he passed from the attic room and down the tenement stairs. A wannish light seemed to cling about the swathings of the mummy; but, apart from this, there was no illumination; and Nushain thought that the house was

strangely dark and silent, as if all its occupants had died or had gone away. He heard no sound from the evening city; nor could he see aught but close-encroaching darkness beyond the windows that should have gazed on a little street. Also, it seemed that the stairs had changed and lengthened, giving no more on the courtyard of the tenement, but plunging deviously into an unsuspected region of stifling vaults and foul, dismal, nitrous corridors.

Here the air was pregnant with death, and the heart of Nushain failed him. Everywhere, in the shadow-curtained crypts and deep-shelved recesses, he felt the innumerable presence of the dead. He thought that there was a sad sighing of stirred cerements, a breath exhaled by long-stiffened cadavers, a dry clicking of lipless teeth beside him as he went. But darkness walled his vision, and he saw nothing save the luminous form of his guide, who stalked onward as if through a natal realm.

It seemed to Nushain that he passed through boundless catacombs in which were housed the mortality and corruption of all the ages. Behind him still he heard the shuffling of Mouzda, and at whiles the low, frightened whine of Ansarath; so he knew that the twain were faithful to him. But upon him, with a chill of lethal damps, there grew the horror of his surroundings; and he shrank with all the repulsion of living flesh from the shrouded thing that he followed, and those other things that mouldered round about in the fathomless gloom.

Half thinking to hearten himself by the sound of his own voice, he began to question the guide; though his tongue clove to his mouth as if palsied. "Is it indeed Vergama, and none other, who has summoned me forth upon this journey? For what purpose has he called me? And in what land is his dwelling?"

“Your fate has summoned you,” said the mummy. “In the end, at the time appointed and no sooner, you shall learn the purpose. As to your third question, you would be no wiser if I should name the region in which the house of Vergama is hidden from mortal trespass: for the land is not listed on any terrene chart, nor map of the starry heavens.”

These answers seemed equivocal and disquieting to Nushain, who was possessed by frightful forebodings as he went deeper into the subterranean charnels. Dark, indeed, he thought, must be the goal of a journey whose first stage had led him so far amid the empire of death and corruption; and dubious, surely, was the being who had called him forth and had sent to him as the first guide a sere and shrunken mummy clad in the tomb’s habiliments.

Now, as he pondered these matters almost to frenzy, the shelfy walls of the catacomb before him were outlined by a dismal light, and he came after the mummy into a chamber where tall candles of black pitch in sockets of tarnished silver burned about an immense and solitary sarcophagus. Upon the blank lid and sides of the sarcophagus, as Nushain neared it, he could see neither runes nor sculptures nor hieroglyphs engraven; but seemed, from the proportions, that a giant must lie within.

The mummy passed athwart the chamber without pausing. But Nushain, seeing that the vaults beyond were full of darkness, drew back with a reluctance that he could not conquer; and though the stars had decreed his journey, it seemed to him that human flesh could go no farther. Prompted by a sudden impulse, he seized one of the heavy yard-long tapers that burned stilly about the sarcophagus; and, holding it in his left hand, with his horoscope still firmly clutched in the right, he fled with Mouzda and Ansarath on the way he had come, hoping to retrace his footsteps through the gloomy caverns and return to Ummaos by the taper’s light.

He heard no sound of pursuit from the mummy. But ever, as he fled, the pitch candle, flaring wildly, revealed to him the horrors that darkness had curtained from his eyes. He saw the bones of men that were piled in repugnant confusion with those of fell monsters, and the riven sarcophagi from which protruded the half-decayed members of innominate beings; members which were neither heads nor hands nor feet. And soon the catacomb divided and redided before him, so that he must choose his way at random, not knowing whether it would lead him back to Ummaos or into the untrod depths.

Presently he came to the huge, browless skull of an uncouth creature, which reposed on the ground with upward-gazing orbits; and beyond the skull was the monster's moldly skeleton, wholly blocking the passage. Its ribs were cramped by the narrowing walls, as if it had crept there and had died in the darkness, unable to withdraw or go forward. White spiders, demon-headed and large as monkeys, had woven their webs in the hollow arches of the bones; and they swarmed out interminably as Nushain approached; and the skeleton seemed to stir and quiver as they seethed over it abhorrently and dropped to the ground before the astrologer. Behind them others poured in a countless army, crowding and mantling every ossicle. Nushain fled with his companions; and running back to the forking of the caverns, he followed another passage.

Here he was not pursued by the demon spiders. But, hurrying on lest they or the mummy overtake him, he was soon halted by the rim of a great pit which filled the catacomb from wall to wall and was overwide for the leaping of man. The dog Ansarath, sniffing certain odors that arose from the pit, recoiled with a mad howling; and Nushain, holding the taper outstretched above it, discerned far down a glimmer of ripples spreading circle-wise on some unctuous black fluid; and two blood-red spots appeared

to swim with a weaving motion at the center. Then he heard a hissing as of some great cauldron heated by wizard fires; and it seemed that the blackness boiled upward, mounting swiftly and evilly to overflow the pit; and the red spots, as they neared him, were like luminous eyes that gazed malignantly into his own...

So Nushain turned away in haste; and, returning upon his steps, he found the mummy awaiting him at the junction of the catacombs.

“It would seem, O Nushain, that you have doubted your own horoscope,” said the guide, with a certain irony. “However, even a bad astrologer, on occasion, may read the heavens aright. Obey, then, the stars that decreed your journey.”

Henceforward, Nushain followed the mummy without recalcitrance. Returning to the chamber in which stood the immense sarcophagus, he was enjoined by his guide to replace in its socket the black taper he had stolen. Without other light than the phosphorescence of the mummy’s cerements, he threaded the foul gloom of those profounder ossuaries which lay beyond. At last, through caverns where a dull dawning intruded upon the shadows, he came out beneath shrouded heavens, on the shore of a wild sea that clamored in mist and cloud and spindrift. As if recoiling from the harsh air and light, the mummy drew back into the subterrane, and it said:

“Here my dominion ends, and I must leave you to await the second guide.”

Standing with the poignant sea-salt in his nostrils, with his hair and garments outblown on the gale, Nushain heard a metallic clangor, and saw that a door of rusty bronze had closed in the cavern-entrance. The beach was walled by unscalable cliffs that ran sheerly to the wave on each hand. So perforce the astrologer waited; and from the torn surf he beheld erelong the emergence of a sea-blue merman whose head was half human, half fish;

and behind the merman there hove a small black barge that was not steered or moved by any visible being. At this, Nushain recalled the hieroglyphs of the sea-creature and the boat which had appeared on the margin of his nativity; and unrolling the papyrus, he saw with wonderment that the figures were both gone; and he doubted not that they had passed, like the mummy's hieroglyph, through all the zodiacal Houses, even to that House which presided over his destiny; and thence, mayhap, they had emerged into material being. But in their stead now was the burning hieroglyph of a fire-colored salamander, set opposite to the Great Dog.

The merman beckoned to him with antic gestures, grinning deeply, and showing the white serrations of his shark-like teeth. Nushain went forward and entered the barge in obedience to the signs made by the sea-creature; and Mouzda and Ansarath, in faithfulness to their master, accompanied him. Thereupon the merman swam away through the boiling surf; and the barge, as if oared and ruddered by mere enchantment, swung about forthwith, and warring smoothly against the wind and wave, was drawn straightly over that dim, unnamable ocean.

Half-seen amid rushing foam and mist, the merman swam steadily on before. Time and space were surely outpassed during that voyage; and as if he had gone beyond mortal existence, Nushain experienced neither thirst nor hunger. But it seemed that his soul drifted upon seas of strange doubt and direst alienation; and he feared the misty chaos about him even as he had feared the nighted catacombs. Often he tried to question the mer-creature concerning their destination, but received no answer. And the wind blowing from shores unguessed, and the tide flowing to unknown gulfs, were alike filled with whispers of awe and terror.

Nushain pondered the mysteries of his journey almost to madness; and the thought came to him that, after passing through the region of death, he

was now traversing the gray limbo of uncreated things; and, thinking this, he was loath to surmise the third stage of his journey; and he dared not reflect upon the nature of its goal.

Anon, suddenly, the mists were riven, and a cataract of golden rays poured down from a high-seated sun. Near at hand, to the lee of the driving barge, a tall island hove with verdurous trees and light, shell-shaped domes and blossomy gardens hanging far up in the dazzlement of noon. There, with a sleepy purling, the surf was lulled on a low, grassy shore that had not known the anger of storm; and fruited vines and full-blown flowers were pendent above the water. It seemed that a spell of oblivion and slumber was shed from the island, and that any who landed thereon would dwell inviolable for ever in sun-bright dreams. Nushain was seized with a longing for its green, flowery refuge; and he wished to voyage no farther into the dreadful nothingness of the mist-bound ocean. And between his longing and his terror, he quite forgot the terms of that destiny which had been ordained for him by the stars.

There was no halting nor swerving of the barge; but it drew still nearer to the isle in its coasting; and Nushain saw that the intervening water was clear and shallow, so that a tall man might easily wade to the beach. He sprang into the sea, holding his horoscope aloft, and began to walk toward the island; and Mouzda and Ansarath followed him, swimming side by side.

Though hampered somewhat by his long wet robes, the astrologer thought to reach that alluring shore; nor was there any movement on the part of the merman to intercept him. The water was midway between his waist and his armpits; and now it lapped at his girdle; and now at the knee-folds of his garment; and the island vines and blossoms drooped fragrantly above him.

Then, being but a step from that enchanted beach, he heard a great hissing, and saw that the vines, the boughs, the flowers, the very grasses, were intertwined and mingled with a million serpents, writhing endlessly to and fro in hideous agitation. From all parts of that lofty island the hissing came, and the serpents, with foully mottled volumes, coiled, crept and slithered upon it everywhere; and no single yard of its surface was free from their defilement, or clear for human treading.

Turning seaward in his revulsion, Nushain found the merman and the barge waiting close at hand. Hopelessly he re-entered the barge with his followers, and the magically driven boat resumed its course. And now, for the first time, the merman spoke, saying over his shoulder in a harsh, half-articulate voice, not without irony: "It would seem, O Nushain, that you lack faith in your own divinations. However, even the poorest of astrologers may sometimes cast a horoscope correctly. Cease, then, to rebel against that which the stars have written."

The barge drove on, and the mists closed heavily about it, and the noon-bright island was lost to view. After a vague interim the muffled sun went down behind inchoate waters and clouds; and a darkness as of primal night lay everywhere. Presently, through the torn rack, Nushain beheld a strange heaven whose signs and planets he could not recognize; and at this there came upon him the black horror of utmost dereliction. Then the mists and clouds returned, veiling that unknown sky from his scrutiny. And he could discern nothing but the merman, who was visible by a wan phosphor that clung always about him in his swimming.

Still the barge drove on; and in time it seemed that a red morning rose stifled and conflagrant behind the mists. The boat entered the broadening light, and Nushain, who had thought to behold the sun once more, was dazzled by a strange shore where flames towered in a high unbroken wall,

feeding perpetually, to all appearances, on bare sand and rock. With a mighty leaping and a roar as of blown surf the flames went up, and a heat like that of many furnaces smote far on the sea. Swiftly the barge neared the shore; and the merman, with uncouth gestures of farewell, dived and disappeared under the waters.

Nushain could scarcely regard the flames or endure their heat. But the barge touched the strait tongue of land lying between them and the sea; and before Nushain, from the wall of fire, a blazing salamander emerged, having the form and hue of that hieroglyph which had last appeared on his horoscope. And he knew, with ineffable consternation, that this was the third guide of his threefold journey.

“Come with me,” said the salamander, in a voice like the crackling of fagots. Nushain stepped from the barge to that strand which was hot as an oven beneath his feet; and behind him, though with palpable reluctance, Mouzda and Ansarath still followed. But, approaching the flames behind the salamander, and half swooning from their ardor, he was overcome by the weakness of mortal flesh; and seeking again to evade his destiny, he fled along the narrow scroll of beach between the fire and the water. But he had gone only a few paces when the salamander, with a great fiery roaring and racing, intercepted him; and it drove him straight toward the fire with terrible flailings of its dragon-like tail, from which showers of sparks were emitted. He could not face the salamander, and he thought the flames would consume him like paper as he entered them: but in the wall there appeared a sort of opening, and the fires arched themselves into an arcade, and he passed through with his followers, herded by the salamander, into an ashen land where all things were veiled with low-hanging smoke and steam.

Here the salamander observed with a kind of irony: “Not wrongly, O Nushain, have you interpreted the stars of your horoscope. And now your

journey draws to an end, and you will need no longer the services of a guide.” So saying, it left him, going out like a quenched fire on the smoky air.

Nushain, standing irresolute, beheld before him a white stairway that mounted amid the veering vapors. Behind him the flames rose unbroken, like a topless rampart; and on either hand, from instant to instant, the smoke shaped itself into demon forms and faces that menaced him. He began to climb the stairs, and the shapes gathered below and about, frightful as a wizard’s familiars, and keeping pace with him as he went upward, so that he dared not pause or retreat. Far up he climbed in the fummy dimness, and came unaware to the open portals of a house of grey stone rearing to unguessed height and amplitude.

Unwillingly, but driven by the thronging of the smoky shapes, he passed through the portals with his companions. The house was a place of long, empty halls, tortuous as the folds of a sea-conch. There were no windows, no lamps; but it seemed that bright suns of silver had been dissolved and diffused in the air. Fleeing from the hellish wraiths that pursued him, the astrologer followed the winding halls and emerged ultimately in an inner chamber where space itself was immured. At the room’s center a cowed and muffled figure of colossal proportions sat upright on a marble chair, silent, unstimulating. Before the figure, on a sort of table, a vast volume lay open.

Nushain felt the awe of one who approaches the presence of some high demon or deity. Seeing that the phantoms had vanished, he paused on the room’s threshold: for its immensity made him giddy, like the void interval that lies between the worlds. He wished to withdraw; but a voice issued from the cowed being, speaking softly as the voice of his own inmost mind:

“I am Vergama, whose other name is Destiny; Vergama, on whom you have called so ignorantly and idly, as men are wont to call on their hidden lords; Vergama, who has summoned you on the journey which all men must make at one time or another, in one way or another. Come forward, O Nushain, and read a little in my book.”

The astrologer was drawn as by an unseen hand to the table. Leaning above it, he saw that the huge volume stood open at its middle pages, which were covered with a myriad signs written in inks of various colors, and representing men, gods, fishes, birds, monsters, animals, constellations and many other things. At the end of the last column of the right-hand page, where little space was left for other inscriptions, Nushain beheld the hieroglyphs of an equal-sided triangle of stars, such as had lately appeared in proximity to the Dog; and, following these, the hieroglyphs of a mummy, a merman, a barge and a salamander, resembling the figures that had come and gone on his horoscope, and those that had guided him to the house of Vergama.

“In my book,” said the cowed figure, “the characters of all things are written and preserved. All visible forms, in the beginning, were but symbols written by me; and at the last they shall exist only as the writing of my book. For a season they issue forth, taking to themselves that which is known as substance... It was I, O Nushain, who set in the heavens the stars that foretold your journey; I, who sent the three guides. And these things, having served their purpose, are now but infoliate ciphers, as before.”

Vergama paused, and an infinite silence returned to the room, and a measureless wonder was upon the mind of Nushain. Then the cowed being continued:

“Among men, for a while, there was that person called Nushain the astrologer, together with the dog Aasarath and the negro Mouzda, who

followed his fortunes... But now, very shortly, I must turn the page, and before turning it, must finish the writing that belongs thereon.”

Nushain thought that a wind arose in the chamber, moving lightly with a weird sigh, though he felt not the actual breath of its passing. But he saw that the fur of Ansarath, cowering close beside him, was ruffled by the wind. Then, beneath his marvelling eyes, the dog began to dwindle and wither, as if seared by a lethal magic; and he lessened to the size of a rat, and thence to the smallness of a mouse and the lightness of an insect, though preserving still his original form. After that, the tiny thing was caught up by the sighing air, and it flew past Nushain as a gnat might fly; and, following it, he saw that the hieroglyph of a dog was inscribed suddenly beside that of the salamander, at the bottom of the right-hand page. But, apart from this, there remained no trace of Ansarath.

Again a wind breathed in the room, touching not the astrologer, but fluttering the ragged raiment of Mouzda, who crouched near to his master, as if appealing for protection, and the mute became shrunken and shrivelled, turning at the last to a thing light and thin as the black, tattered wing-shard of a beetle, which the air bore aloft. And Nushain saw that the hieroglyph of a one-eyed Negro was inscribed following that of the dog; but, aside from this, there was no sign of Mouzda.

Now, perceiving clearly the doom that was designed for him, Nushain would have fled from the presence of Vergama. He turned from the outspread volume and ran toward the chamber door, his worn, tawdry robes of an astrologer flapping about his thin shanks. But softly in his ear, as he went, there sounded the voice of Vergama:

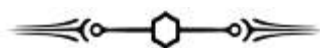
“Vainly do men seek to resist or evade that destiny which turns them to ciphers in the end. In my book, O Nushain, there is room even for a bad astrologer.”

Once more the weird sighing arose, and a cold air played upon Nushain as he ran; and he paused midway in the vast room as if a wall had arrested him. Gently the air breathed on his lean, gaunt figure, and it lifted his greying locks and beard, and it plucked softly at the roll of papyrus which he still held in his hand. To his dim eyes, the room seemed to reel and swell, expanding infinitely. Borne upward, around and around, in a swift vertiginous swirling, he beheld the seated shape as it loomed ever higher above him in cosmic vastness. Then the god was lost in light; and Nushain was a weightless and exile thing, the withered skeleton of a lost leaf, rising and falling on the bright whirlwind.

In the book of Vergama, at the end of the last column of the right-hand page, there stood the hieroglyph of a gaunt astrologer, carrying a furled nativity.

Vergama leaned forward from his chair, and turned the page.

Sadastor



LISTEN, FOR THIS is the tale that was told to a fair lamia by the demon Charnadis as they sat together on the top of Mophi, above the sources of the Nile, in those years when the sphinx was young. Now the lamia was vexed, for her beauty was grown an evil legend in both Thebais and Elephantine; so that men were become fearful of her lips and cautious of her embrace, and she had no lover for almost a fortnight. She lashed her serpentine tail on the ground, and moaned softly, and wept those mythical tears which a serpent weeps. And the demon told this tale for her comforting:

Long, long ago, in the red cycles of my youth (said Charnadis), I was like all young demons, and was prone to use the agility of my wings in fantastic flights; to hover and poise like a gier-eagle above Tartarus and the pits of Python; or to lift the broad blackness of my vans on the orbit of stars. I have followed the moon from evening twilight to morning twilight; and I have gazed on the secrets of that Medusean face which she averts eternally from the earth. I have read through filming ice the ithyphallic runes on columns yet extant in her deserts; and I know the hieroglyphs which solve forgotten riddles, or hint eonian histories, on the walls of her cities taken by ineluctable snow. I have flown through the triple ring of Saturn, and have mated with lovely basilisks, on isles towering league-high from stupendous oceans where each wave is like the rise and fall of Himalayas. I have dared the clouds of Jupiter, and the black and freezing abysses of Neptune, which are crowned with eternal starlight; and I have sailed beyond to incommensurable suns, compared with which the sun that thou knowest is a corpse-candle in a stinted vault. There, in tremendous planets, I have furred

my flight on the terraced mountains, large as fallen asteroids, where, with a thousand names and a thousand images, undreamt-of Evil is served and worshipt in unsurmisable ways. Or, perched in the flesh-colored lips of columnar blossoms, whose perfume was an ecstasy of incommunicable dreams, I have mocked the wiving monsters, and have lured their females that sang and fawned at the base of my hiding-place.

Now, in my indefatigable questing among the remoter galaxies, I came one day to that forgotten and dying planet which in the language of its unrecorded peoples was called Sadastor. Immense and drear and gray beneath a waning sun, far-fissured with enormous chasms, and covered from pole to pole with the never-ebbing tides of the desert sand, it hung in space without moon or satellite, an abomination and a token of doom to fairer and younger worlds. Checking the speed of my interstellar flight, I followed its equator with a poised and level wing, above the peaks of cyclopean volcanoes, and bare, terrific ridges of elder hills, and deserts pale with the ghastliness of salt, that were manifestly the beds of former oceans.

In the very center of one of these ocean-beds, beyond sight of the mountains that formed its primeval shoreline, and leagues below their level, I found a vast and winding valley that plunged even deeplier into the abysses of this dreadful world. It was walled with perpendicular cliffs and buttresses and pinnacles of a rusty-red stone, that were fretted into a million bizarrely sinister forms by the sinking of the olden seas. I flew slowly among these cliffs as they wound ever downward in tortuous spirals for mile on mile of utter and irredeemable desolation, and the light grew dimmer above me as ledge on ledge and battlement on battlement of that strange red stone upreared themselves between my wings and the heavens. Here, when I rounded a sudden turn of the precipice, in the profoundest depth where the rays of the sun fell only for a brief while at noon, and the

rocks were purple with everlasting shadow, I found a pool of dark-green water — the last remnant of the former ocean, ebbing still amid steep, insuperable walls. And from this pool there cried a voice, in accents that were subtly sweet as mortal wine of the mandragora, and faint as the murmuring of shells. And the voice said:

“Pause and remain, I pray, and tell me who thou art, who comest thus to the accursed solitude wherein I die.”

Then, pausing on the brink of the pool, I peered into its gulf of shadow, and saw the pallid glimmering of a female form that upreared itself from the waters. And the form was that of a siren, with hair the color of ocean-kelp, and berylline eyes, and a dolphine shaped tail. And I said to her:

“I am the demon Charnadis. But who art thou, who lingerest thus in this ultimate pit of abomination, in the depth of a dying world?”

She answered: “I am a siren, and my name is Lyspial. Of the seas wherein I saw and sported at leisure many centuries ago, and whose gallant mariners I drew to an enchanted death on the shores of my disastrous isle, there remains only this fallen pool. Alas! For the pool dwindles daily, and when it is wholly gone I too must perish.”

She began to weep, and her briny tears fell down and were added to the briny waters.

Fain would I have comforted her, and I said:

“Weep not, for I will lift thee upon my wings and bear thee to some newer world, where the sky-blue waters of abounding seas are shattered to intricate webs of wannest foam, on low shores that are green and aureate with pristine spring. There, perchance for eons, thou shalt have thine abode, and galleys with painted oars and great barges purpureal-sailed shall be drawn upon thy rocks in the red light of sunsets domed with storm, and

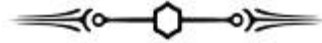
shall mingle the crash of their figured prows with the sweet sorcery of thy mortal singing.”

But still she wept, and would not be comforted, crying:

“Thou art kind, but this would avail me not, for I was born of the waters of this world, and with its waters I must die. Alas! my lovely seas, that ran in unbroken sapphire from shores of perennial blossoms to shores of everlasting snow! Alas! the sea-winds, with their mingled perfumes of brine and weed, and scents of ocean flowers and flowers of the land, and far-blown exotic balsams! Alas! the quinquiremes of cycle-ended wars, and the heavy-laden argosies with sails and cordage of byssus, that plied between barbaric isles with their cargoes of topaz or garnet-coloured wines and jade and ivory idols, in the antique summers that now are less than legend! Alas! the dead captains, the beautiful dead sailors that were borne by the ebbing tide to my couches of amber seaweed, in my caverns underneath a cedared promontory! Alas! the kisses that I laid on their cold and hueless lips, on their sealed marmorean eyelids!”

And sorrow and pity seized me at her words, for I knew that she spoke the lamentable truth, that her doom was in the lessening of the bitter waters. So, after many proffered condolences, no less vague than vain, I bade her a melancholy farewell and flew heavily away between the spiral cliffs where I had come, and clomb the somber skies till the world Sadastor was only a darkling mote far down in space. But the tragic shadow of the siren’s fate, and her sorrow, lay grievously upon me for hours, and only in the kisses of a beautiful fierce vampire, in a far-off and young and exuberant world, was I able to forget it. And I tell thee now the tale thereof, that haply thou mayest be consoled by the contemplation of a plight that was infinitely more dolorous and irremediable than thine own.

The Death of Ilalotha



Black Lord of bale and fear, master of all confusion!
By thee, thy prophet saith,
New power is given to wizards after death,
And witches in corruption draw forbidden breath
And weave such wild enchantment and illusion
As none but lamiae may use;
And through thy grace the charneled corpses lose
Their horror, and nefandous loves are lighted
In noisome vaults long nighted;
And vampires make their sacrifice to thee —
Disgorging blood as if great urns had poured
Their bright vermilion hoard
About the washed and weltering sarcophagi.
— Ludar's Litany to Thasaidon.

ACCORDING TO THE CUSTOM in old Tasuun, the obsequies of Ilalotha, lady-in-waiting to the self-widowed Queen Xantlicha, had formed an occasion of much merrymaking and prolonged festivity. For three days, on a bier of diverse-colored silks from the Orient, under a rose-hued canopy that might well have domed some nuptial couch, she had lain clad with gala garments amid the great feasting-hall of the royal palace in Miraab. About her, from morning dusk to sunset, from cool even to torridly glaring dawn, the feverish tide of the funeral orgies had surged and eddied without slackening. Nobles, court officials, guardsmen, scullions, astrologers,

eunuchs, and all the high ladies, waiting-women and female slaves of Xantlicha, had taken part in that prodigal debauchery which was believed to honour most fitly the deceased. Mad songs and obscene ditties were sung, and dancers whirled in vertiginous frenzy to the lascivious pleading of untirable lutes. Wines and liquors were poured torrentially from monstrous amphorae; the tables fumed with spicy meats piled in huge hummocks and forever replenished. The drinkers offered libation to Ilalotha, till the fabrics of her bier were stained to darker hues by the spilt vintages. On all sides around her, in attitudes of disorder or prone abandonment, lay those who had yielded to amorous license of the fullness of their potations. With halfshut eyes and lips slightly parted, in the rosy shadow cast by the catafalque, she wore no aspect of death but seemed a sleeping empress who ruled impartially over the living and the dead. This appearance, together with a strange heightening of her natural beauty, was remarked by many: and some said that she seemed to await a lover's kiss rather than the kisses of the worm.

On the third evening, when the many-tongued brazen lamps were lit and the rites drew to their end, there returned to court the Lord Thulos, acknowledged lover of Queen Xantlicha, who had gone a week previous to visit his domain on the western border and had heard nothing of Ilalotha's death. Still unaware, he came into the hall at that hour when the saturnalia began to flag and the fallen revelers to outnumber those who still moved and drank and made riot.

He viewed the disordered hall with little surprise, for such scenes were familiar to him from childhood. Then, approaching the bier, he recognized its occupant with a certain startlement. Among the numerous ladies of Miraab who had drawn his libertine affections, Ilalotha had held sway longer than most; and, it was said, she had grieved more passionately over

his defection than any other. She had been superseded a month before by Xantlicha, who had shown favor to Thulos in no ambiguous manner; and Thulos, perhaps, had abandoned her not without regret: for the role of lover to the queen, though advantageous and not wholly disagreeable, was somewhat precarious. Xantlicha, it was universally believed, had rid herself of the late King Archain by means of a tomb-discovered vial of poison that owed its peculiar subtlety and virulence to the art of ancient sorcerers. Following this act of disposal, she had taken many lovers, and those who failed to please her came invariably to ends no less violent than that of Archain. She was exigent, exorbitant, demanding a strict fidelity somewhat irksome to Thulos; who, pleading urgent affairs on his remote estate, had been glad enough of a week away from court.

Now, as he stood beside the dead woman, Thulos forgot the queen and bethought him of certain summer nights that had been honeyed by the fragrance of jasmine and the jasmine-white beauty of Ilalotha. Even less than the others could he believe her dead: for her present aspect differed in no wise from that which she had often assumed during their old intercourse. To please his whim, she had feigned the inertness and complaisance of slumber or death; and at such times he had loved her with an ardor undismayed by the pantherine vehemence with which, at other whiles, she was wont to reciprocate or invite his caresses.

Moment by moment, as if through the working of some powerful necromancy, there grew upon him a curious hallucination, and it seemed that he was again the lover of those lost nights, and had entered that bower in the palace gardens where Ilalotha waited him on a couch strewn with overblown petals, lying with bosom quiet as her face and hands. No longer was he aware of the crowded hall: the high-flaring lights, the wine-flushed faces, had become a moonbright parterre of drowsily nodding blossoms,

and the voices of the courtiers were no more than a faint suspiration of wind amid cypress and jasmine. The warm, aphrodisiac perfumes of the June night welled about him; and again, as of old, it seemed that they arose from the person of Ilalotha no less than from the flowers. Prompted by intense desire, he stooped over and felt her cool arm stir involuntarily beneath his kiss.

Then, with the bewilderment of a sleep-walker awakened rudely, he heard a voice that hissed in his ear with soft venom: "Hast forgotten thyself, my Lord Thulos? Indeed I wonder little, for many of my bawcocks deem that she is fairer in death than in life." And, turning from Ilalotha, while the weird spell dissolved from his senses, he found Xantlicha at his side. Her garments were disarrayed, her hair was unbound and disheveled, and she reeled slightly, clutching him by the shoulder with sharp-nailed fingers. Her full, poppy-crimson lips were curled by a vixenish fury, and in her long-lidded yellow eyes there blazed the jealousy of an amorous cat.

Thulos, overwhelmed by a strange confusion, remembered but partially the enchantment to which he had succumbed; and he was unsure whether or not he had actually kissed Ilalotha and had felt her flesh quiver to his mouth. Verily, he thought, this thing could not have been, and a waking dream had momentarily seized him. But he was troubled by the words of Xantlicha and her anger, and by the half-furtive drunken laughter and ribald whispers that he heard passing among the people about the hall.

"Beware, my Thulos," the queen murmured, her strange anger seeming to subside; "For men say that she was a witch."

"How did she die?" queried Thulos.

"From no other fever than that of love, it is rumored."

"Then, surely, she was no witch," Thulos argued with a lightness that was far from his thoughts and feelings; "for true sorcery should have found

the cure.”

“It was from love of thee,” said Xantlicha darkly; “and as all women know, thy heart is blacker and harder than black adamant. No witchcraft, however potent, could prevail thereon.” Her mood, as she spoke, appeared to soften suddenly. “Thy absence has been long, my lord. Come to me at midnight: I will wait for thee in the south pavilion.”

Then, eyeing him sultrily for an instant from under drooped lids, and pinching his arm in such a manner that her nails pierced through cloth and skin like a cat’s talons, she turned from Thulos to hail certain of the harem-eunuchs.

Thulos, when the queen’s attention was disengaged from him, ventured to look again at Ilalotha; pondering, meanwhile, the curious remarks of Xantlicha. He knew that Ilalotha, like many of the court-ladies, had dabbled in spells and philtres; but her witchcraft had never concerned him, since he felt no interest in other charms or enchantments than those with which nature had endowed the bodies of women. And it was quite impossible for him to believe that Ilalotha had died from a fatal passion: since, in his experience, passion was never fatal.

Indeed, as he regarded her with confused emotions, he was again beset by the impression that she had not died at all. There was no repetition of the weird, half-remembered hallucination of other time and place; but it seemed to him that she had stirred from her former position on the wine stained bier, turning her face toward him a little, as a woman turns to an expected lover; that the arm he had kissed (either in dream or reality) was outstretched a little farther from her side.

Thulos bent nearer, fascinated by the mystery and drawn by a stranger attraction that he could not have named. Again, surely, he had dreamt or had been mistaken. But even as the doubt grew, it seemed that the bosom of

Ilalotha stirred in faint respiration, and he heard an almost inaudible but thrilling whisper: "Come to me at midnight. I will wait for thee... in the tomb."

At this instant there appeared beside the catafalque certain people in the sober and rusty raiment of sextons, who had entered the hall silently, unperceived by Thulos or by any of the company. They carried among them a thin-walled sarcophagus of newly welded and burnished bronze. It was their office to remove the dead woman and bear her to the sepulchral vaults of her family, which were situated in the old necropolis lying somewhat to northward of the palace-gardens.

Thulos would have cried out to restrain them from their purpose; but his tongue clove tightly; nor could he move any of his members. Not knowing whether he slept or woke, he watched the people of the cemetery as they placed Ilalotha in the sarcophagus and bore her quickly from the hall, unfollowed and still unheeded by the drowsy bacchanalians. Only when the somber cortège had departed was he able to stir from his position by the empty bier. His thoughts were sluggish, and full of darkness and indecision. Smitten by an immense fatigue that was not unnatural after his day-long journey, he withdrew to his apartments and fell instantly into death-deep slumber.

Freeing itself gradually from the cypress-boughs, as if from the long, stretched fingers of witches, a waning and misshapen moon glared horizontally through the eastern window when Thulos awoke. By this token, he knew that the hour drew toward midnight, and recalled the assignation which Queen Xantlicha had made with him: an assignation which he could hardly break without incurring the queen's deadly displeasure. Also, with singular clearness, he recalled another rendezvous... at the same time but in a different place. Those incidents and impressions of

Ilalotha's funeral, which, at the time, had seemed so dubitable and dream-like, returned to him with a profound conviction of reality, as if etched on his mind by some mordant chemistry of sleep... or the strengthening of some sorcerous charm. He felt that Ilalotha had indeed stirred on her bier and spoken to him; that the sextons had borne her still living to the tomb. Perhaps her supposed demise had been merely a sort of catalepsy; or else she had deliberately feigned death in a last effort to revive his passion. These thoughts awoke within him a raging fever of curiosity and desire; and he saw before him her pale, inert, luxurious beauty, presented as if by enchantment.

Direly distraught, he went down by the lampless stairs and hallways to the moonlit labyrinth of the gardens. He cursed the untimely exigence of Xantlicha. However, as he told himself, it was more than likely that the queen, continuing to imbibe the liquors of Tasuun, had long since reached a condition in which she would neither keep nor recall her appointment. This thought reassured him: in his queerly bemused mind, it soon became a certainty; and he did not hasten toward the south pavilion but strolled vaguely amid the wan and somber bosage.

More and more it seemed unlikely that any but himself was abroad: for the long, unlit wings of the palace sprawled as in vacant stupor; and in the gardens there were only dead shadows, and pools of still fragrance in which the winds had drowned. And over all, like a pale, monstrous poppy, the moon distilled her death-white slumber. Thulos, no longer mindful of his rendezvous with Xantlicha, yielded without further reluctance to the urgency that drove him toward another goal... Truly, it was no less than obligatory that he should visit the vaults and learn whether or not he had been deceived in his belief concerning Ilalotha. Perhaps, if he did not go, she would stifle in the shut sarcophagus, and her pretended death would

quickly become an actuality. Again, as if spoken in the moonlight before him, he heard the words she had whispered, or seemed to whisper, from the bier: "Come to me at midnight... I will wait for thee... in the tomb."

With the quickening steps and pulses of one who fares to the warm, petal-sweet couch of an adored mistress, he left the palace-grounds by an unguarded northern postern and crossed the weedy common between the royal gardens and the old cemetery. Unchilled and undismayed, he entered those always-open portals of death, where ghoulish monsters of black marble, glaring with hideously pitted eyes, maintained their charnel postures before the crumbling pylons.

The very stillness of the low-bosomed graves, the rigor and pallor of the tall shafts, the deepness of bedded cypress shadows, the inviolacy of death by which all things were invested, served to heighten the singular excitement that had fired Thulos' blood. It was as if he had drunk a philtre spiced with mummia. All around him the mortuary silence seemed to burn and quiver with a thousand memories of Ilalotha, together with those expectations to which he had given as yet no formal image...

Once, with Ilalotha, he had visited the subterranean tomb of her ancestors; and, recalling its situation clearly, he came without indirection to the low-arched and cedar-darkened entrance. Rank nettles and fetid fumitories, growing thickly about the seldom-used adit, were crushed down by the tread of those who had entered there before Thulos; and the rusty, iron-wrought door sagged heavily inward on its loose hinges. At his feet there lay an extinguished flambeau, dropped, no doubt, by one of the departing sextons. Seeing it, he realized that he had brought with him neither candle nor lantern for the exploration of the vaults, and found in that providential torch an auspicious omen.

Bearing the lit flambeau, he began his investigation. He gave no heed to the piled and dusty sarcophagi in the first reaches of the subterrane: for, during their past visit, Ilalotha had shown to him a niche at the innermost extreme, where, in due time, she herself would find sepulture among the members of that decaying line. Strangely, insidiously, like the breath of some vernal garden, the languid and luscious odor of jasmine swam to meet him through the musty air, amid the tiered presence of the dead; and it drew him to the sarcophagus that stood open between others tightly lidded. There he beheld Ilalotha lying in the gay garments of her funeral, with half-shut eyes and half-parted lips; and upon her was the same weird and radiant beauty, the same voluptuous pallor and stillness, that had drawn Thulos with a necromantic charm.

“I knew that thou wouldst come, O Thulos,” she murmured, stirring a little, as if involuntarily, beneath the deepening ardor of his kisses that passed quickly from throat to bosom...

The torch that had fallen from Thulos’ hand expired in the thick dust...

Xantlicha, retiring to her chamber betimes, had slept illy. Perhaps she had drunk too much or too little of the dark, ardent vintages; perhaps her blood was fevered by the return of Thulos, and her jealousy still troubled by the hot kiss which he had laid on Ilalotha’s arm during the obsequies. A restlessness was upon her; and she rose well before the hour of her meeting with Thulos, and stood at her chamber window seeking such coolness as the night air might afford.

The air, however, seemed heated as by the burning of hidden furnaces; her heart appeared to swell in her bosom and stifle her; and her unrest and agitation were increased rather than diminished by the spectacle of the moon-lulled gardens. She would have hurried forth to the tryst in the pavilion; but, despite her impatience, she thought it well to keep Thulos

waiting. Leaning thus from her sill, she beheld Thulos when he passed amid the parterres and arbors below. She was struck by the unusual haste and intentness of his steps, and she wondered at their direction, which could bring him only to places remote from the rendezvous she had named. He disappeared from her sight in the cypress-lined alley that led to the north garden-gate; and her wonderment was soon mingled with alarm and anger when he did not return.

It was incomprehensible to Xantlicha that Thulos, or any man, would dare to forget the tryst in his normal senses; and seeking an explanation, she surmised that the working of some baleful and potent sorcery was probably involved. Nor, in the light of certain incidents that she had observed, and much else that had been rumored, was it hard for her to identify the possible sorceress. Ilalotha, the queen knew, had loved Thulos to the point of frenzy, and had grieved inconsolably after his desertion of her. People said that she had wrought various ineffectual spells to bring him back; that she had vainly invoked demons and sacrificed to them, and had made futile invocations and death-charms against Xantlicha. In the end, she had died of sheer chagrin and despair, or perhaps had slain herself with some undetected poison... But, as was commonly believed in Tasuun, a witch dying thus, with unslaked desires and frustrate cantrips, could turn herself into a lamia vampire and procure thereby the consummation of all her sorceries...

The queen shuddered, remembering these things; and remembering also the hideous and malign transformation that was said to accompany the achievement of such ends: for those who used in this manner the power of hell must take on the very character and the actual semblance of infernal beings. Too well she surmised the destination of Thulos, and the danger to

which he had gone forth if her suspicions were true. And, knowing that she might face an equal danger, Xantlicha determined to follow him.

She made little preparation, for there was no time to waste; but took from beneath her silken bed-cushion a small, straight-bladed dagger that she kept always within reach. The dagger had been anointed from point to hilt with such venom as was believed efficacious against either the living or the dead. Bearing it in her right hand, and carrying in the other a slot-eyed lantern that she might require later, Xantlicha stole swiftly from the palace.

The last lees of the evening's wine ebbed wholly from her brain, and dim, ghastly fears awoke, warning her like the voices of ancestral phantoms. But, firm in her determination, she followed the path taken by Thulos; the path taken earlier by those sextons who had borne Ilalotha to her place of sepulture. Hovering from tree to tree, the moon accompanied her like a worm-hollowed visage. The soft, quick patter of her cothurns, breaking the white silence, seemed to tear the filmy cobweb pall that withheld from her a world of spectral abominations. And more and more she recalled, of those legendries that concerned such beings as Ilalotha; and her heart was shaken within her: for she knew that she would meet no mortal woman but a thing raised up and inspirited by the seventh hell. But amid the chill of these horrors, the thought of Thulos in the lamia's arms was like a red brand that seared her bosom.

Now the necropolis yawned before Xantlicha, and her path entered the cavernous gloom of far-vaulted funereal trees, as if passing into monstrous and shadowy mouths that were tusked with white monuments. The air grew dank and noisome, as if filled with the breathing of open crypts. Here the queen faltered, for it seemed that black, unseen cacodemons rose all about her from the graveyard ground, towering higher than the shafts and boles, and standing in readiness to assail her if she went farther. Nevertheless, she

came anon to the dark adit that she sought. Tremulously she lit the wick of the dot-eyed lantern; and, piercing the gross underground darkness before her with its bladed beam, she passed with ill-subdued terror and repugnance into that abode of the dead... and perchance of the Undead.

However, as she followed the first turnings of the catacomb, it seemed that she was to encounter nothing more abhorrent than charnel mold and century-sifted dust; nothing more formidable than the serried sarcophagi that lined the deeply hewn shelves of stone; sarcophagi that had stood silent and undisturbed ever since the time of their deposition. Here, surely the slumber of all the dead was unbroken, and the nullity of death was inviolate.

Almost the queen doubted that Thulos had preceded her there; till, turning her light on the ground, she discerned the print of his poulaines, long-tipped and slender in the deep dust amid those foot-marks left by the rudely shod sextons. And she saw that the footprints of Thulos pointed only in one direction, while those of the others plainly went and returned.

Then, at an undetermined distance in the shadows ahead, Xantlicha heard a sound in which the sick moaning of some amorous woman was bent with a snarling as of jackals over their meat. Her blood returned frozen upon her heart as she went onward step by slow step, clutching her dagger in a hand drawn sharply back, and holding the light high in advance. The sound grew louder and most distinct; and there came to her now a perfume as of flowers in some warm June night; but, as she still advanced, the perfume was mixed with more and more of a smothering foulness such as she had never heretofore known, and was touched with the reeking of blood.

A few paces more, and Xantlicha stood as if a demon's arm had arrested her: for her lantern's light had found the inverted face and upper body of Thulos, hanging from the end of a burnished, new-wrought sarcophagus

that occupied a scant interval between others green with rust. One of Thulos' hands clutched rigidly the rim of the sarcophagus, while the other hand, moving feebly, seemed to caress a dim shape that leaned above him with arms showing jasmine-white in the narrow beam, and dark fingers plunging into his bosom. His head and body seemed but an empty hull, and his hand hung skeleton-thin on the bronze rim, and his whole aspect was vein-drawn, as if he had lost more blood than was evident on his torn throat and face, and in his sodden raiment and dripping hair.

From the thing stooping above Thulos, there came ceaselessly that sound which was half moan and half snarl. And as Xantlicha stood in petrific fear and loathing, she seemed to hear from Thulos' lips an indistinct murmur, more of ecstasy than pain. The murmur ceased, and his head hung slacklier than before, so that the queen deemed him verily dead. At this she found such wrathful courage as enabled her to step nearer and raise the lantern higher: for, even amid her extreme panic, it came to her that by means of the wizard-poisoned dagger she might still haply slay the thing that had slain Thulos.

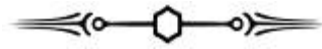
Waveringly the light crept aloft, disclosing inch by inch that infamy which Thulos had caressed in the darkness...

It crept even to the crimson-smeared wattles, and the fanged and ruddled orifice that was half mouth and half beak... till Xantlicha knew why the body of Thulos was a mere shrunken hull... In what the queen saw, there remained nothing of Ilalotha except the white, voluptuous arms, and a vague outline of human breasts melting momentarily into breasts that were not human, like clay molded by a demon sculptor. The arms too began to change and darken; and, as they changed, the dying hand of Thulos stirred again and fumbled with a caressing movement toward the horror. And the thing seemed to heed him not but withdrew its fingers from his bosom, and

reached across him with members stretching enormously, as if to claw the queen or fondle her with its dribbling talons.

It was then that Xantlicha let fall the lantern and the dagger, and ran with shrill, endless shriekings and laughters of immitigable madness from the vault.

The Return of the Sorcerer



I HAD BEEN out of work for several months, and my savings were perilously near the vanishing point. Therefore I was naturally elated when I received from John Carnby a favorable answer inviting me to present my qualifications in person. Carnby had advertised for a secretary, stipulating that all applicants must offer a preliminary statement of their capacities by letter; and I had written in response to the advertisement.

Carnby, no doubt, was a scholarly recluse who felt averse to contact with a long waiting-list of strangers; and he had chosen this manner of weeding out beforehand many, if not all, of those who were ineligible. He had specified his requirements fully and succinctly, and these were of such nature as to bar even the average well-educated person. A knowledge of Arabic was necessary, among other things; and luckily I had acquired a certain degree of scholarship in this unusual tongue.

I found the address, of whose location I had formed only a vague idea, at the end of a hilltop avenue in the suburbs of Oakland. It was a large, two-story house, overshadowed by ancient oaks and dark with a mantling of unchecked ivy, among hedges of unpruned privet and shrubbery that had gone wild for many years. It was separated from its neighbors by a vacant, weed-grown lot on one side and a tangle of vines and trees on the other, surrounding the black ruins of a burnt mansion.

Even apart from its air of long neglect, there was something drear and dismal about the place — something that inhered in the ivy-blurred outlines of the house, in the furtive, shadowy windows, and the very forms of the misshapen oaks and oddly sprawling shrubbery. Somehow, my elation

became a trifle less exuberant, as I entered the grounds and followed an unswept path to the front door.

When I found myself in the presence of John Carnby, my jubilation was still somewhat further diminished; though I could not have given a tangible reason for the premonitory chill, the dull, sombre feeling of alarm that I experienced, and the leaden sinking of my spirits. Perhaps it was the dark library in which he received me as much as the man himself — a room whose musty shadows could never have been wholly dissipated by sun or lamplight. Indeed, it must have been this; for John Carnby himself was very much the sort of person I had pictured him to be.

He had all the earmarks of the lonely scholar who has devoted patient years to some line of erudite research. He was thin and bent, with a massive forehead and a mane of grizzled hair; and the pallor of the library was on his hollow, clean-shaven cheeks. But coupled with this, there was a nerve-shattered air, a fearful shrinking that was more than the normal shyness of a recluse, and an unceasing apprehensiveness that betrayed itself in every glance of his dark-ringed, feverish eyes and every movement of his bony hands. In all likelihood his health had been seriously impaired by over-application; and I could not help but wonder at the nature of the studies that had made him a tremulous wreck. But there was something about him — perhaps the width of his bowed shoulders and the bold aquilinity of his facial outlines — which gave the impression of great former strength and a vigor not yet wholly exhausted.

His voice was unexpectedly deep and sonorous.

‘I think you will do, Mr. Ogden,’ he said, after a few formal questions, most of which related to my linguistic knowledge, and in particular my mastery of Arabic. ‘Your labors will not be very heavy; but I want someone who can be on hand at any time required. Therefore you must live with me.

I can give you a comfortable room, and I guarantee that my cooking will not poison you. I often work at night; and I hope you will not find the irregular hours too disagreeable.'

No doubt I should have been overjoyed at this assurance that the secretarial position was to be mine. Instead, I was aware of a dim, unreasoning reluctance and an obscure forewarning of evil as I thanked John Carnby and told him that I was ready to move in whenever he desired. He appeared to be greatly pleased; and the queer apprehensiveness went out of his manner for a moment.

'Come immediately — this very afternoon, if you can,' he said. 'I shall be very glad to have you and the sooner the better. I have been living entirely alone for some time; and I must confess that the solitude is beginning to pall upon me. Also, I have been retarded in my labors for lack of the proper help. My brother used to live with me and assist me, but he has gone away on a long trip.'

I returned to my downtown lodgings, paid my rent with the last few dollars that remained to me, packed my belongings, and in less than an hour was back at my new employer's home. He assigned me a room on the second floor, which, though unaired and dusty, was more than luxurious in comparison with the hall-bedroom that failing funds had compelled me to inhabit for some time past. Then he took me to his own study, which was on the same floor, at the further end of the hall. Here, he explained to me, most of my future work would be done.

I could hardly restrain an exclamation of surprise as I viewed the interior of this chamber. It was very much as I should have imagined the den of some old sorcerer to be. There were tables strewn with archaic instruments of doubtful use, with astrological charts, with skulls and alembics and crystals, with censers such as are used in the Catholic Church, and volumes

bound in worm-eaten leather with verdigris-mottled clasps. In one corner stood the skeleton of a large ape; in another, a human skeleton; and overhead a stuffed crocodile was suspended.

There were cases overpiled with books, and even a cursory glance at the titles showed me that they formed a singularly comprehensive collection of ancient and modern works on demonology and the black arts. There were some weird paintings and etchings on the walls, dealing with kindred themes; and the whole atmosphere of the room exhaled a medley of half-forgotten superstitions. Ordinarily I would have smiled if confronted with such things; but somehow, in this lonely, dismal house, beside the neurotic, hag-ridden Carnby, it was difficult for me to repress an actual shudder.

On one of the tables, contrasting incongruously with this *mêlange* of medievalism and Satanism, there stood a typewriter, surmounded with piles of disorderly manuscript. At one end of the room there was a small, curtained alcove with a bed in which Carnby slept. At the end opposite the alcove, between the human and simian skeletons, I perceived a locked cupboard that was set in the wall.

Carnby had noted my surprise, and was watching me with a keen, analytic expression which I found impossible to fathom. He began to speak, in explanatory tones.

‘I have made a life-study of demonism and sorcery,’ he declared. ‘It is a fascinating field, and one that is singularly neglected. I am now preparing a monograph, in which I am trying to correlate the magical practices and demon-worship of every known age and people. Your labors, at least for a while, will consist in typing and arranging the voluminous preliminary notes which I have made, and in helping me to track down other references and correspondences. Your knowledge of Arabic will be invaluable to me, for I am none too well-grounded in this language myself, and I am

depending for certain essential data on a copy of the Necronomicon in the original Arabic text. I have reason to think that there are certain omissions and erroneous renderings in the Latin version of Olaus Wormius.'

I had heard of this rare, well-high fabulous volume, but had never seen it. The book was supposed to contain the ultimate secrets of evil and forbidden knowledge; and, moreover, the original text, written by the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, was said to be unprocurable. I wondered how it had come into Carnby's possession.

'I'll show you the volume after dinner,' Carnby went on. 'You will doubtless be able to elucidate one or two passages that have long puzzled me.'

The evening meal, cooked and served by my employer himself, was a welcome change from cheap restaurant fare. Carnby seemed to have lost a good deal of his nervousness. He was very talkative, and even began to exhibit a certain scholarly gaiety after we had shared a bottle of mellow Sauterne. Still, with no manifest reason, I was troubled by intimations and forebodings which I could neither analyze nor trace to their rightful source.

We returned to the study, and Carnby brought out from a locked drawer the volume of which he had spoken. It was enormously old, and was bound in ebony covers arabesqued with silver and set with darkly glowing garnets. When I opened the yellowing pages, I drew back with involuntary revulsion at the odor which arose from them — an odor that was more than suggestive of physical decay, as if the book had lain among corpses in some forgotten graveyard and had taken on the taint of dissolution.

Carnby's eyes were burning with a fevered light as he took the old manuscript from my hands and turned to a page near the middle. He indicated a certain passage with his lean forefinger.

'Tell me what you make of this,' he said, in a tense, excited whisper.

I deciphered the paragraph, slowly and with some difficulty, and wrote down a rough English version with the pad and pencil which Caraby offered me. Then, at his request, I read it aloud:

‘It is verily known by few, but is nevertheless no attestable fact, that the will of a dead sorcerer hath power upon his own body and can raise it up from the tomb and perform therewith whatever action was unfulfilled in life. And such resurrections are invariably for the doing of malevolent deeds and for the detriment of other’s. Most readily can the corpse be animated if all its members have remained intact; and yet there are cases in which the excelling will of the wizard hath reared up from death the sundered pieces of a body hewn in many fragments, and hath caused them to serve his end, either separately or in a temporary reunion. But in every instance, after the action hath been completed, the body lapseth into its former state.’

Of course, all this was errant gibberish. Probably it was the strange, unhealthy look of utter absorption with which my employer listened, more than that damnable passage from the Necronomicon, which caused my nervousness and made me start violently when, toward the end of my reading, I heard an indescribable slithering noise in the hall outside. But when I finished the paragraph and looked up at Carnby, I was more startled by the expression of stark, staring fear which his features had assumed — an expression as of one who is haunted by some hellish phantom. Somehow, I got the feeling that he was listening to that odd noise in the hallway rather than to my translation of Abdul Alhazred.

‘The house is full of rats,’ he explained, as he caught my inquiring glance. ‘I have never been able to get rid of them, with all my efforts.’

The noise, which still continued, was that which a rat might make in dragging some object slowly along the floor. It seemed to draw closer, to approach the door of Carnby’s room, and then, after an intermission, it

began to move again and receded. My employer's agitation was marked; he listened with fearful intentness and seemed to follow the progress of the sound with a terror that mounted as it drew near and decreased a little with its recession.

'I am very nervous,' he said. 'I have worked too hard lately, and this is the result. Even a little noise upsets me.'

The sound had now died away somewhere in the house. Carnby appeared to recover himself in a measure.

'Will you please re-read your translation?' he requested. 'I want to follow it very carefully, word by word.'

I obeyed. He listened with the same look of unholy absorption as before, and this time we were not interrupted by any noises in the hallway. Carnby's face grew paler, as if the last remnant of blood had been drained from it, when I read the final sentences; and the fire in his hollow eyes was like phosphorescence in a deep vault.

'That is a most remarkable passage,' he commented. 'I was doubtful about its meaning, with my imperfect Arabic; and I have found that the passage is wholly omitted in the Latin of Olaus Wormius. Thank you for your scholarly rendering. You have certainly cleared it up for me.'

His tone was dry and formal, as if he were repressing himself and holding back a world of unsurmisable thoughts and emotions. Somehow I felt that Carnby was more nervous and upset than ever, and also that my rendering from the Necronomicon had in some mysterious manner contributed to his perturbation. He wore a ghastly brooding expression, as if his mind were busy with some unwelcome and forbidden theme.

However, seeming to collect himself, he asked me to translate another passage. This turned out to be a singular incantatory formula for the exorcism of the dead, with a ritual that involved the use of rare Arabian

spices and the proper intoning of at least a hundred names of ghouls and demons. I copied it all out for Carnby, who studied it for a long time with a rapt eagerness that was more than scholarly.

‘That, too,’ he observed, ‘is not in Olaus Wormius.’ After perusing it again, he folded the paper carefully and put it away in the same drawer from which he had taken the Necronomicon.

That evening was one of the strangest I have ever spent. As we sat for hour after hour discussing renditions from that unhallowed volume, I came to know more and more definitely that my employer was mortally afraid of something; that he dreaded being alone and was keeping me with him on this account rather than for any other reason. Always he seemed to be waiting and listening with a painful, tortured expectation, and I saw that he gave only a mechanical awareness to much that was said. Among the weird appurtenances of the room, in that atmosphere of unmanifested evil, of untold horror, the rational part of my mind began to succumb slowly to a recrudescence of dark ancestral fears. A scorner of such things in my normal moments, I was now ready to believe in the most baleful creations of superstitious fancy. No doubt, by some process of mental contagion, I had caught the hidden terror from which Carnby suffered.

By no word or syllable, however, did the man admit the actual feelings that were evident in his demeanor, but he spoke repeatedly of a nervous ailment. More than once, during our discussion, he sought to imply that his interest in the supernatural and the Satanic was wholly intellectual, that he, like myself, was without personal belief in such things. Yet I knew infallibly that his implications were false; that he was driven and obsessed by a real faith in all that he pretended to view with scientific detachment, and had doubtless been a victim to some imaginary horror entailed by his occult

researches. But my intuition afforded me no clue to the actual nature of this horror.

There was no repetition of the sounds that had been so disturbing to my employer. We must have sat till after midnight with the writings of the mad Arab open before us. At last Carnby seemed to realize the lateness of the hour.

‘I fear I have kept you up too long,’ he said apologetically. ‘You must go and get some sleep. I am selfish, and I forget that such hours are not habitual to others, as they are to me.’

I made the formal denial of his self-impeachment which courtesy required, said good night, and sought my own chamber with a feeling of intense relief. It seemed to me that I would leave behind me in Carnby’s room all the shadowy fear and oppression to which I had been subjected.

Only one light was burning in the long passage. It was near Carnby’s door; and my own door at the further end, close to the stair-head, was in deep shadow. As I groped for the knob, I heard a noise behind me, and turned to see in the gloom a small, indistinct body that sprang from the hall landing to the top stair, disappearing from view. I was horribly startled; for even in that vague, fleeting glimpse, the thing was much too pale for a rat and its form was not at all suggestive of an animal. I could not have sworn what it was, but the outlines had seemed unmentionably monstrous. I stood trembling violently in every limb, and heard on the stairs a singular bumping sound like the fall of an object rolling downward from step to step. The sound was repeated at regular intervals, and finally ceased.

If the safety of the soul and body had depended upon it, I could not have turned on the stair-light; nor could I have gone to the top steps to ascertain the agency of that unnatural bumping. Anyone else, it might seem, would have done this. Instead, after a moment of virtual petrification, I entered my

room, locked the door, and went to bed in a turmoil of unresolved doubt and equivocal terror. I left the light burning; and I lay awake for hours, expecting momentarily a recurrence of that abominable sound. But the house was as silent as a morgue, and I heard nothing. At length, in spite of my anticipations to the contrary, I fell asleep and did not awaken till after many sodden, dreamless hours.

It was ten o'clock, as my watch informed me. I wondered whether my employer had left me undisturbed through thoughtfulness, or had not arisen himself. I dressed and went downstairs, to find him waiting at the breakfast table. He was paler and more tremulous than ever, as if he had slept badly.

'I hope the rats didn't annoy you too much,' he remarked, after a preliminary greeting. 'Something really must be done about them.'

'I didn't notice them at all,' I replied. Somehow, it was utterly impossible for me to mention the queer, ambiguous thing which I had seen and heard on retiring the night before. Doubtless I had been mistaken; doubtless it had been merely a rat after all, dragging something down the stairs. I tried to forget the hideously repeated noise and the momentary flash of unthinkable outlines in the gloom.

My employer eyed me with uncanny sharpness, as if he sought to penetrate my inmost mind. Breakfast was a dismal affair; and the day that followed was no less dreary. Carnby isolated himself till the middle of the afternoon, and I was left to my own devices in the well-supplied but conventional library downstairs. What Carnby was doing alone in his room I could not surmise; but I thought more than once that I heard the faint, monotonous intonations of a solemn voice. Horror-breeding hints and noisome intuitions invaded my brain. More and more the atmosphere of that house enveloped and stifled me with poisonous, miasmal mystery; and I felt everywhere the invisible brooding of malignant incubi.

It was almost a relief when my employer summoned me to his study. Entering, I noticed that the air was full of a pungent, aromatic smell and was touched by the vanishing coils of a blue vapor, as if from the burning of Oriental gums and spices in the church censers. An Ispahan rug had been moved from its position near the wall to the center of the room, but was not sufficient to cover entirely a curving violet mark that suggested the drawing of a magic circle on the floor. No doubt Carnby had been performing some sort of incantation; and I thought of the awesome formula I had translated at his request.

However, he did not offer any explanation of what he had been doing. His manner had changed remarkably and was more controlled and confident than at any former time. In a fashion almost business-like he laid before me a pile of manuscript which he wanted me to type for him. The familiar click of the keys aided me somewhat in dismissing any apprehensions of vague evil, and I could almost smile at the *recherché* and terrific information comprised in my employer's notes, which dealt mainly with formulae for the acquisition of unlawful power. But still, beneath my reassurance, there was a vague, lingering disquietude.

Evening came; and after our meal we returned again to the study. There was a tenseness in Carnby's manner now, as if he were eagerly awaiting the result of some hidden test. I went on with my work; but some of his emotion communicated itself to me, and ever and anon I caught myself in an attitude of strained listening.

At last, above the click of the keys, I heard the peculiar slithering in the hall. Carnby had heard it, too, and his confident look utterly vanished, giving place to the most pitiable fear.

The sound drew nearer and was followed by a dull, dragging noise, and then by more sounds of an unidentifiable slithering and scuttling nature that

varied in loudness. The hall was seemingly full of them, as if a whole army of rats were hauling some carrion booty along the floor. And yet no rodent or number of rodents could have made such sounds, or could have moved anything so heavy as the object which came behind the rest. There was something in the character of those noises, something without name or definition, which caused a slowly creeping chill to invade my spine.

‘Good Lord! What is all that racket?’ I cried.

‘The rats! I tell you it is only the rats!’ Carnby’s voice was a high, hysterical shriek.

A moment later, there came an unmistakable knocking on the door, near the sill. At the same time I heard a heavy thudding in the locked cupboard at the further end of the room. Caraby had been standing erect, but now he sank limply into a chair. His features were ashen, and his look was almost maniacal with fright.

The nightmare doubt and tension became unbearable and I ran to the door and flung it open, in spite of a frantic remonstrance from my employer. I had no idea what I should find as I stepped across the sill into the dim-lit hall. When I looked down and saw the thing on which I had almost trodden, my feeling was one of sick amazement and actual nausea. It was a human hand which had been severed at the wrist — a bony, bluish hand like that of a week-old corpse, with garden-mold on the fingers and under the long nails. The damnable thing had moved! It had drawn back to avoid me, and was crawling along the passage somewhat in the manner of a crab. And following it with my gaze, I saw that there were other things beyond it, one of which I recognized as a man’s foot and another as a forearm. I dared not look at the rest. All were moving slowly, hideously away in a charnel procession, and I cannot describe the fashion in which they moved. Their individual vitality horrifying beyond endurance. It was more than the

vitality of life, yet the air was laden with a carrion taint. I averted my eyes and stepped back into Carnby's room, closing the door behind me with a shaking hand. Carnby was at my side with the key, which he turned in the lock with palsy-stricken fingers that had become as feeble as those of an old man.

‘You saw them?’ he asked in a dry, quavering whisper.

‘In God's name, what does it all mean?’ I cried.

Carnby went back to his chair, tottering a little with weakness. His lineaments were agonized by the gnawing of some inward horror, and he shook visibly like an ague patient. I sat down in a chair beside him, and he began to stammer forth his unbelievable confession, half incoherently, with inconsequential mouthings and many breaks and pauses:

‘He is stronger than I am — even in death, even with his body dismembered by the surgeon's knife and saw that I used. I thought he could not return after that — after I had buried the portions in a dozen different places, in the cellar, beneath the shrubs, at the foot of the ivy-vines. But the Necronomicon is right... and Helman Carnby knew it. He warned me before I killed him, he told me he could return — even in that condition.

‘But I did not believe him. I hated Helman, and he hated me, too. He had attained to higher power and knowledge and was more favored by the Dark Ones than I. That was why I killed him — my own twin-brother, and my brother in the service of Satan and of Those who were before Satan. We had studied together for many years. We had celebrated the Black Mass together and we were attended by the same familiars. But Helman Carnby had gone deeper into the occult, into the forbidden, where I could not follow him. I feared him, and I could not endure his supremacy.

‘It is more than a week — it is ten days since I did the deed. But Helman — or some part of him — has returned every night... God! His accursed

hands crawling on the floor! His feet, his arms, the segments of his legs, climbing the stairs in some unmentionable way to haunt me! ... Christ! His awful, bloody torso lying in wait. I tell you, his hands have come even by day to tap and fumble at my door... and I have stumbled over his arms in the dark.

‘Oh, God! I shall go mad with the awfulness of it. But he wants me to go mad, he wants to torture me till my brain gives way. That is why he haunts me in this piece-meal fashion. He could end it all any time with the demoniacal power that is his. He could re-knit his sundered limbs and body and slay me as I slew him.

‘How carefully I buried the parts, with what infinite forethought! And how useless it was! I buried the saw and knife, too, at the farther end of the garden, as far away as possible from his evil, itching hands. But I did not bury the head with the other pieces — I kept it in that cupboard at the end of my room. Sometimes I have heard it moving there, as you heard it a little while ago... But he does not need the head, his will is elsewhere, and can work intelligently through all his members.

‘Of course, I locked all the doors and windows at night when I found that he was coming back... But it made no difference. And I have tried to exorcize him with the appropriate incantations — with all those that I knew. Today I tried that sovereign formula from the Necronomicon which you translated for me. I got you here to translate it. Also, I could no longer bear to be alone and I thought that it might help if there were someone else in the house. That formula was my last hope. I thought it would hold him — it is a most ancient and most dreadful incantation. But, as you have seen, it is useless...’

His voice trailed off in a broken mumble, and he sat staring before him with sightless, intolerable eyes in which I saw the beginning flare of

madness. I could say nothing — the confession he had made was so ineffably atrocious. The moral shock, and the ghastly supernatural horror, had almost stupefied me. My sensibilities were stunned; and it was not till I had begun to recover that I felt the irresistible surge of a flood of loathing for the man beside me.

I rose to my feet. The house had grown very silent, as if the macabre and charnel army of beleaguerment had now retired to its various graves. Carnby had left the key in the lock; and I went to the door and turned it quickly.

‘Are you leaving? Don’t go,’ Carnby begged in a voice that was tremulous with alarm, as I stood with my hand on the door-knob.

‘Yes, I am going,’ I said coldly. ‘I am resigning my position right now; and I intend to pack my belongings and leave your house with as little delay as possible.’

I opened the door and went out, refusing to listen to the arguments and pleadings and protestations he had begun to babble. For the nonce, I preferred to face whatever might lurk in the gloomy passage, no matter how loathsome and terrifying, rather than endure any longer the society of John Carnby.

The hall was empty; but I shuddered with repulsion at the memory of what I had seen, as I hastened to my room. I think I should have screamed aloud at the least sound or movement in the shadows.

I began to pack my valise with a feeling of the most frantic urgency and compulsion. It seemed to me that I could not escape soon enough from that house of abominable secrets, over which hung an atmosphere of smothering menace. I made mistakes in my haste, I stumbled over chairs, and my brain and fingers grew numb with a paralyzing dread.

I had almost finished my task, when I heard the sound of slow measured footsteps coming up the stairs. I knew that it was not Carnby, for he had locked himself immediately in his room when I had left; and I felt sure that nothing could have tempted him to emerge. Anyway, he could hardly have gone downstairs without my hearing him.

The footsteps came to the top landing and went past my door along the hall, with that same dead monotonous repetition, regular as the movement of a machine. Certainly it was not the soft, nervous tread of John Carnby.

Who, then, could it be? My blood stood still in my veins; I dared not finish the speculation that arose in my mind.

The steps paused; and I knew that they had reached the door of Carnby's room. There followed an interval in which I could scarcely breathe; and then I heard an awful crashing and shattering noise, and above it the soaring scream of a man in the uttermost extremity of fear.

I was powerless to move, as if an unseen iron hand had reached forth to restrain me; and I have no idea how long I waited and listened. The scream had fallen away in a swift silence; and I heard nothing now, except a low, peculiar, recurrent sound which my brain refused to identify.

It was not my own volition, but a stronger will than mine, which drew me forth at last and impelled me down the hall to Carnby's study. I felt the presence of that will as an overpowering, superhuman thing — a demoniac force, a malign mesmerism.

The door of the study had been broken in and was hanging by one hinge. It was splintered as by the impact of more than mortal strength. A light was still burning in the room, and the unmentionable sound I had been hearing ceased as I neared the threshold. It was followed by an evil, utter stillness.

Again I paused, and could go no further. But, this time, it was something other than the hellish, all-pervading magnetism that petrified my limbs and

arrested me before the sill. Peering into the room, in the narrow space that was framed by the doorway and lit by an unseen lamp, I saw one end of the Oriental rug, and the gruesome outlines of a monstrous, unmoving shadow that fell beyond it on the floor. Huge, elongated, misshapen, the shadow was seemingly cast by the arms and torso of a naked man who stooped forward with a surgeon's saw in his hand. Its monstrosity lay in this: though the shoulders, chest, abdomen and arms were all clearly distinguishable, the shadow was headless and appeared to terminate in an abruptly severed neck. It was impossible, considering the relative position, for the head to have been concealed from sight through any manner of foreshortening.

I waited, powerless to enter or withdraw. The blood had flowed back upon my heart in an ice-thick tide, and thought was frozen in my brain. An interval of termless horror, and then, from the hidden end of Carnby's room, from the direction of the locked cupboard, there came a fearsome and violent crash, and the sound of splintering wood and whining hinges, followed by the sinister, dismal thud of an unknown object striking the floor.

Again there was silence — a silence as of consummated Evil brooding above its unnamable triumph. The shadow had not stirred. There was a hideous contemplation in its attitude, and the saw was still held in its poisoning hand, as if above a completed task.

Another interval, and then, without warning, I witnessed the awful and unexplainable disintegration of the shadow, which seemed to break gently and easily into many different shadows ere it faded from view. I hesitate to describe the manner, or specify the places, in which this singular disruption, this manifold cleavage, occurred. Simultaneously, I heard the muffled clatter of a metallic implement on the Persian rug, and a sound that was not that of a single body but of many bodies falling.

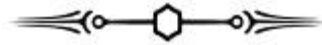
Once more there was silence — a silence as of some nocturnal cemetery, when grave-diggers and ghouls are done with their macabre toil, and the dead alone remain.

Drawn by that baleful mesmerism, like a somnambulist led by an unseen demon, I entered the room, I knew with a loathly prescience the sight that awaited me beyond the sill — the double heap of human segments, some of them fresh and bloody, and others already blue with beginning putrefaction and marked with earth-stains, that were mingled in abhorrent confusion on the rug.

A reddened knife and saw were protruding from the pile; and a little to one side, between the rug and the open cupboard with its shattered door, there reposed a human head that was fronting the other remnants in an upright posture. It was in the same condition of incipient decay as the body to which it had belonged; but I swear that I saw the fading of a malignant exultation from its features as I entered. Even with the marks of corruption upon them, the lineaments bore a manifest likeness of John Carnby, and plainly they could belong only to a twin brother.

The frightful inferences that smothered my brain with their black and clammy cloud are not to be written here. The horror which I beheld — and the greater horror which I surmised — would have put to shame hell's foulest enormities in their frozen pits. There was but one mitigation and one mercy: I was compelled to gaze only for a few instants on that intolerable scene. Then, all at once, I felt that something had withdrawn from the room; the malign spell was broken, the overpowering volition that had held me captive was gone. It had released me now, even as it had released the dismembered corpse of Helman Carnby. I was free to go; and I fled from the ghastly chamber and ran headlong through an unlit house and into the outer darkness of the night.

The Testament of Athammaus



IT HAS BECOME needful for me, who am no wielder of the stylus of bronze or the pen of calamus, and whose only proper tool is the long, double-handed sword, to indite this account of the curious and lamentable happenings which foreran the universal desertion of Commoriom by its king and its people. This I am well-fitted to do, for I played a signal part in these happenings; and I left the city only when all the others had gone.

Now Commoriom, as everyone knows, was aforetime the resplendent, high-built capital, and the marble and granite crown of all Hyperborea. But, concerning the cause of its abandonment, there are now so many warring legends and so many tales of a false and fabulous character, that I, who am old in years and triply old in horrors, I, who have grown weary with no less than eleven lustrums of public service, am compelled to write this record of the truth ere it fade utterly from the tongues and memories of men. And this I do, though the telling thereof will include a confession of my one defeat, my one failure in the dutiful administration of a committed task.

For those who will read the narrative in future years, and haply in future lands, I shall now introduce myself. I am Athammaus, the chief headsman of Uzuldaroum, who held formerly the same office in Commoriom. My father, Manghai Thal, was headsman before me; and the sires of my father, even to the mythic generations of the primal kings, have wielded the great copper sword of justice on the block of *eighon*-wood.

Forgive an aged man if he seem to dwell, as is the habit of the old, among the youthful recollections that have gathered to themselves the

kingly purple of removed horizons and the strange glory that illumines irretrievable things. Lo! I am made young again when I recall Commorion, when in this grey city of the sunken years I behold in retrospect her walls that looked mountainously down upon the jungle, and the alabastrine multitude of her heaven-fretting spires. Opulent among cities, and superb and magisterial, and paramount over all was Commorion, to whom tribute was given from the shores of the Atlantean sea to that sea in which is the immense continent of Mu; to whom the traders came from utmost Thulan that is walled on the north with unknown ice, and from the southern realm of Tscho Vulpanomi which ends in a lake of boiling asphaltum. Ah! proud and lordly was Commorion, and her humblest dwellings were more than the palaces of other cities. And it was not, as men fable nowadays, because of that maundering prophecy once uttered by the White Sybil from the isle of snow which is named Polarion, that her splendor and spaciousness was delivered over to the spotted vines of the jungle and the spotted snakes. Nay, it was because of a direr thing than this, and a tangible horror against which the law of kings, the wisdom of hierophants and the sharpness of swords were alike impotent. Ah! not lightly was she overcome, not easily were her defenders driven forth. And though others forget, or haply deem her no more than a vain and dubitable tale, I shall never cease to lament Commorion.

My sinews have dwindled grievously now; and Time has drunken stealthily from my veins; and has touched my hair with the ashes of suns extinct. But in the days whereof I tell, there was no braver and more stalwart headsman than I in the whole of Hyperborea; and my name was a red menace, a loudly spoken warning to the evil-doers of the forest and the town, and the savage robbers of uncouth outland tribes. Wearing the blood-bright purple of my office, I stood each morning in the public square where

all might attend and behold, and performed for the edification of all men my allotted task. And each day the tough, golden-ruddy copper of the huge crescent blade was darkened not once but many times with a rich and wine-like sanguine. And because of my never-faltering arm, my infallible eye, and the clean blow which there was never any necessity to repeat, I was much honored by the King Loquamethros and by the populace of Commoriom.

I remember well, on account of their more than unique atrocity, the earliest rumors that came to me in my active life regarding the outlaw Knygathin Zhaum. This person belonged to an obscure and highly unpleasant people called the Voormis, who dwelt in the black Eiglophian Mountains at a full day's journey from Commoriom, and inhabited according to their tribal custom the caves of ferine animals less savage than themselves, which they had slain or otherwise dispossessed. They were generally looked upon as more beast-like than human, because of their excessive hairiness and the vile, ungodly rites and usages to which they were addicted. It was mainly from among these beings that the notorious Knygathin Zhaum had recruited his formidable band, who were terrorizing the hills subjacent to the Eiglophian Mountains with daily deeds of the most infamous and iniquitous rapine. Wholesale robbery was the least of their crimes; and mere anthropophagism was far from being the worst.

It will readily be seen, from this, that the Voormis were a somewhat aboriginal race, with an ethnic heritage of the darkest and most revolting type. And it was commonly said that Knygathin Zhaum himself possessed an even murkier strain of ancestry than the others, being related on the maternal side to that queer, non-anthropomorphic god, Tsathoggua, who was worshipped so widely during the sub-human cycles. And there were those who whispered of even stranger blood (if one could properly call it

blood) and a monstrous linkage with the swart Protean spawn that had come down with Tsathoggua from elder worlds and exterior dimensions where physiology and geometry had both assumed an altogether inverse trend of development. And, because of this mingling of ultra-cosmic strains, it was said that the body of Knygathin Zhaum, unlike his shaggy, umber-colored fellow-tribesmen, was hairless from crown to heel and was pied with great spots of black and yellow; and moreover he himself was reputed to exceed all others in his cruelty and cunning.

For a long time this execrable outlaw was no more to me than an horrific name; but inevitably I thought of him with a certain professional interest. There were many who believed him invulnerable by any weapon, and who told of his having escaped in a manner which none could elucidate from more than one dungeon whose walls were not to be scaled or pierced by mortal beings. But of course I discounted all such tales, for my official experience had never yet included anyone with properties or abilities of a like sort. And I knew well the superstitiousness of the vulgar multitude.

From day to day new reports reached me amid the preoccupations of never-slighted duty. This noxious marauder was not content with the seemingly ample sphere of operations afforded by his native mountains and the outlying hill-regions with their fertile valleys and well-peopled towns. His forays became bolder and more extensive; till one night he descended on a village so near to Commorion that it was usually classed as a suburb. Here he and his feculent crew committed numerous deeds of an unspecifiable enormity; and bearing with them many of the villagers for purposes even less designable, they retired to their caves in the glassy-walled Eiglophian peaks ere the ministers of justice could overtake them.

It was this audaciously offensive act which prompted the law to exert its full power and vigilance against Knygathin Zhaum. Before that, he and his

men had been left to the local officers of the country-side; but now his misdeeds were such as to demand the rigorous attention of the constabulary of Commorion. Henceforth all his movements were followed as closely as possible; the towns where he might descend were strictly guarded; and traps were set everywhere.

Even thus, Knygathin Zhaum contrived to evade capture for month after month; and all the while he repeated his far-flung raids with an embarrassing frequency. It was almost by chance, or through his own foolhardiness, that he was eventually taken in broad daylight on the highway near the city's outskirts. Contrary to all expectation, in view of his renowned ferocity, he made no resistance whatever; but finding himself surrounded by mailed archers and bill-bearers, he yielded to them at once with an oblique, enigmatic smile — a smile that troubled for many nights thereafter the dreams of all who were present.

For reasons which were never explained, he was altogether alone when taken; and none of his fellows were captured either coincidentally or subsequently. Nevertheless, there was much excitement and jubilation in Commorion, and everyone was curious to behold the dreaded outlaw. More even than others, perhaps, I felt the stirrings of interest; for upon me, in due course, the proper decapitation of Knygathin Zhaum would devolve.

From hearing the hideous rumors and legends whose nature I have already outlined, I was prepared for something out of the ordinary in the way of criminal personality. But even at first sight, when I watched him as he was borne to prison through a moiling crowd, Knygathin Zhaum surpassed the most sinister and disagreeable anticipations. He was naked to the waist, and wore the fulvous hide of some long-haired animal which hung in filthy tatters to his knees. Such details, however, contributed little to those elements in his appearance which revolted and even shocked me. His

limbs, his body, his lineaments were outwardly formed like those of aboriginal man; and one might even have allowed for his utter hairlessness, in which there was a remote and blasphemously caricatural suggestion of the shaven priest; and even the broad, formless mottling of his skin, like that of a huge boa, might somehow have been glossed over as a rather extravagant peculiarity of pigmentation. It was something else, it was the unctuous, verminous ease, the undulant litheness and fluidity of his every movement, seeming to hint at an inner structure and vertebration that were less than human — or, one might almost have said, a sub-ophidian lack of all bony frame-work — which made me view the captive, and also my incumbent task, with an unparalleled distaste. He seemed to slither rather than walk; and the very fashion of his jointure, the placing of knees, hips, elbows and shoulders, appeared arbitrary and factitious. One felt that the outward semblance of humanity was a mere concession to anatomical convention; and that his corporeal formation might easily have assumed — and might still assume at any instant — the unheard-of outlines and concept-defying dimensions that prevail in trans-galactic worlds. Indeed, I could now believe the outrageous tales concerning his ancestry. And with equal horror and curiosity I wondered what the stroke of justice would reveal, and what noisome, mephitic ichor would befoul the impartial sword in lieu of honest blood.

It is needless to record in circumstantial detail the process by which Knygathin Zhaum was tried and condemned for his manifold enormities. The workings of the law were implacably swift and sure, and their equity permitted of no quibbling or delay. The captive was confined in an oubliette below the main dungeons — a cell hewn in the basic, Archean gneiss at a profound depth, with no entrance other than a hole through which he was lowered and drawn up by means of a long rope and windlass. This hole was

lidded with a huge block and was guarded day and night by a dozen men-at-arms. However, there was no attempt at escape on the part of Knygathin Zhaum: indeed, he seemed unnaturally resigned to his prospective doom. To me, who have always been possessed of a strain of prophetic intuition, there was something overtly ominous in this unlooked-for resignation. Also, I did not like the demeanor of the prisoner during his trial. The silence which he had preserved at all times following his capture and incarceration was still maintained before his judges. Though interpreters who knew the harsh, sibilant Eiglophian dialect were provided, he would make no answer to questions; and he offered no defense. Least of all did I like the unabashed and unblinking manner in which he received the final pronouncement of death which was uttered in the high court of Commorion by eight judges in turn and solemnly re-affirmed at the end by King Loquamethros. After that, I looked well to the sharpening of my sword, and promised myself that I would concentrate all the resources of a brawny arm and a flawless manual artistry upon the forthcoming execution.

My task was not long deferred, for the usual interval of a fortnight between condemnation and decapitation had been shortened to three days in view of the suspicious peculiarities of Knygathin Zhaum and the heinous magnitude of his proven crimes.

On the morning appointed, after a night that had been rendered dismal by a long-drawn succession of the most abominable dreams, I went with my unfailing punctuality to the block of *eighon*-wood, which was situated with geometrical exactness in the center of the main square. Here a huge crowd had already gathered; and the clear amber sun blazed royally down on the silver and nacarat of court dignitaries, the hodden of merchants and artisans, and the rough pelts that were worn by outland people.

With a like punctuality, Knygathin Zhaum soon appeared amid his entourage of guards, who surrounded him with a bristling hedge of bill-hooks and lances and tridents. At the same time, all the outer avenues of the city, as well as the entrances to the square, were guarded by massed soldiery, for it was feared that the uncaught members of the desperate outlaw band might make an effort to rescue their infamous chief at the last moment.

Amid the unremitting vigilance of his warders, Knygathin Zhaum came forward, fixing upon me the intent but inexpressive gaze of his lidless, ochre-yellow eyes, in which a face-to-face scrutiny could discern no pupils. He knelt down beside the block, presenting his mottled nape without a tremor. As I looked upon him with a calculating eye, and made ready for the lethal stroke, I was impressed more powerfully and more disagreeably than ever by the feeling of a loathsome, underlying plasticity, an invertebrate structure, nauseous and non-terrestrial, beneath his impious mockery of human form. And I could not help perceiving also the air of abnormal coolness, of abstract, impenetrable cynicism, that was maintained by all his parts and members. He was like a torpid snake, or some huge liana of the jungle, that is wholly unconscious of the shearing axe. I was well aware that I might be dealing with things which were beyond the ordinary province of a public headsman; but nathless I lifted the great sword in a clean, symmetrically flashing arc, and brought it down on the piebald nape with all of my customary force and address.

Necks differ in the sensations which they afford to one's hand beneath the penetrating blade. In this case, I can only say that the sensation was not such as I have grown to associate with the cleaving of any known animal substance. But I saw with relief that the blow had been successful: the head of Knygathin Zhaum lay cleanly severed on the porous block, and his body

sprawled on the pavement without even a single quiver of departing animation. As I had expected, there was no blood — only a black, tarry, fetid exudation, far from copious, which ceased in a few minutes and vanished utterly from my sword and from the *eighon*-wood. Also, the inner anatomy which the blade had revealed was devoid of all legitimate vertebration. But to all appearance Knygathin Zhaum had yielded up his obscene life; and the sentence of King Loquamethros and the eight judges of Commorion had been fulfilled with a legal precision.

Proudly but modestly I received the applause of the waiting multitudes, who bore willing witness to the consummation of my official task and were loudly jubilant over the dead scourge. After seeing that the remains of Knygathin Zhaum were given into the hands of the public grave-diggers, who always disposed of such offal, I left the square and returned to my home, since no other decapitations had been set for that day. My conscience was serene, and I felt that I had acquitted myself worthily in the performance of a far from pleasant duty.

Knygathin Zhaum, as was the custom in dealing with the bodies of the most nefarious criminals, was interred with contumelious haste in a barren field outside the city where people cast their orts and rubbish. He was left in an unmarked and unmounded grave between two middens. The power of the law had now been amply vindicated; and everyone was satisfied, from Loquamethros himself to the villagers that had suffered from the depredations of the deceased outlaw.

I retired that night, after a bounteous meal of suvana-fruit and *djongua*-beans, well-irrigated with *foum*-wine. From a moral standpoint, I had every reason to sleep the sleep of the virtuous; but, even as on the preceding night, I was made the victim of one cacodemoniacal dream after another. Of these dreams, I recall only their pervading, unifying consciousness of insufferable

suspense, of monotonously cumulative horror without shape or name; and the ever-torturing sentiment of vain repetition and dark, hopeless toil and frustration. Also, there is a half-memory, which refuses to assume any approach to visual form, of things that were never intended for human perception or human cogitation; and the aforesaid sentiment, and all the horror, were dimly but indissolubly bound up with these. Awaking unrefreshed and weary from what seemed an aeon of thankless endeavor, of treadmill bafflement, I could only impute my nocturnal sufferings to the *djongua*-beans; and decided that I must have eaten all too liberally of these nutritious viands. Mercifully, I did not suspect in my dreams the dark, portentous symbolism that was soon to declare itself.

Now must I write the things that are formidable unto Earth and the dwellers of Earth; the things that exceed all human or terrene regimen; that subvert reason; that mock the dimensions and defy biology. Dire is the tale; and, after seven lustrums, the tremor of an olden fear still agitates my hand as I write.

But of such things I was still oblivious when I sallied forth that morning to the place of execution, where three criminals of a quite average sort, whose very cephalic contours I have forgotten along with their offenses, were to meet their well-deserved doom beneath my capable arm. Howbeit, I had not gone far when I heard an unconscionable uproar that was spreading swiftly from street to street, from alley to alley throughout Commorion. I distinguished a myriad cries of rage, horror, fear and lamentation that were seemingly caught up and repeated by everyone who chanced to be abroad at that hour. Meeting some of the citizenry, who were plainly in a state of the most excessive agitation and were still continuing their outcries, I inquired the reason of all this clamor. And thereupon I learned from them that Knygathin Zhaum, whose illicit career was presumably at an end, had now

re-appeared and had signalized the unholy miracle of his return by the commission of a most appalling act on the main avenue before the very eyes of early passers! He had seized a respectable seller of *djongua*-beans, and had proceeded instantly to devour his victim alive, without heeding the blows, bricks, arrows, javelins, cobblestones and curses that were rained upon him by the gathering throng and by the police. It was only when he had satisfied his atrocious appetite, that he suffered the police to lead him away, leaving little more than the bones and raiment of the *djongua*-seller to mark the spot of this outrageous happening. Since the case was without legal parallel, Knygathin Zhaum had been thrown once more into the oubliette below the city dungeons, to await the will of Loquamethros and the eight judges.

The exceeding discomfiture, the profound embarrassment felt by myself, as well as by the people and the magistracy of Commoriom, can well be imagined. As everyone bore witness, Knygathin Zhaum had been efficiently beheaded and buried according to the customary ritual; and his resurrection was not only against nature but involved a most contumelious and highly mystifying breach of the law. In fact, the legal aspects of the case were such as to render necessary the immediate passing of a special statute, calling for re-judgement, and allowing re-execution, of such malefactors as might thuswise return from their lawful graves. Apart from all this, there was general consternation; and even at that early date, the more ignorant and more religious among the townsfolk were prone to regard the matter as an omen of some impending civic calamity.

As for me, my scientific turn of mind, which repudiated the supernatural, led me to seek an explanation of the problem in the non-terrestrial side of Knygathin Zhaum's ancestry. I felt sure that the forces of an alien biology, the properties of a transtellar life-substance, were somehow involved.

With the spirit of the true investigator, I summoned the grave-diggers who had interred Knygathin Zhaum and bade them lead me to his place of sepulture in the refuse-grounds. Here a most singular condition disclosed itself. The earth had not been disturbed, apart from a deep hole at one end of the grave, such as might have been made by a large rodent. No body of human size, or, at least, of human form, could possibly have emerged from this hole. At my command, the diggers removed all the loose soil, mingled with potsherds and other rubbish, which they had heaped upon the beheaded outlaw. When they reached the bottom, nothing was found but a slight stickiness where the corpse had lain; and this, along with an odor of ineffable foulness which was its concomitant, soon dissipated itself in the open air.

Baffled, and more mystified than ever, but still sure that the enigma would permit of some natural solution, I awaited the new trial. This time, the course of justice was even quicker and less given to quibbling than before. The prisoner was again condemned, and the time of decapitation was delayed only till the following morn. A proviso concerning burial was added to the sentence: the remains were to be sealed in a strong wooden sarcophagus, the sarcophagus was to be inhumed in a deep pit in the solid stone, and the pit filled with massy boulders. These measures, it was felt, should serve amply to restrain the unwholesome and irregular inclinations of this obnoxious miscreant.

When Knygathin Zhaum was again brought before me, amid a redoubled guard and a throng that overflowed the square and all of the outlying avenues, I viewed him with profound concern and with more than my former repulsion. Having a good memory for anatomic details, I noticed some odd changes in his physique. The huge splotches of dull black and sickly yellow that had covered him from head to heel were now somewhat

differently distributed. The shifting of the facial blotches, around the eyes and mouth, had given him an expression that was both grim and sardonic to an unbearable degree. Also, there was a perceptible shortening of his neck, though the place of cleavage and re-union, midway between head and shoulders, had left no mark whatever. And looking at his limbs, I discerned other and more subtle changes. Despite my acumen in physical matters, I found myself unwilling to speculate regarding the processes that might underlie these alterations; and still less did I wish to surmise the problematic results of their continuation, if such should ensue. Hoping fervently that Knygathin Zhaum and the vile, flagitious properties of his unhallowed carcass would now be brought to a permanent end, I raised the sword of justice high in air and smote with heroic might.

Once again, as far as mortal eye was able to determine, the effects of the shearing blow were all that could be desired. The head rolled forward on the eighon-wood, and the torso and its members fell and lay supinely on the maculated flags. From a legal view-point, this doubly nefandous malefactor was now twice dead.

Howbeit, this time I superintended in person the disposal of the remains, and saw to the bolting of the fine sarcophagus of *apha*-wood in which they were laid, and the filling with chosen boulders of the ten-foot pit into which the sarcophagus was lowered. It required three men to lift even the least of these boulders. We all felt that the irrepressible Knygathin Zhaum was due for a quietus.

Alas! for the vanity of earthly hopes and labors! The morrow came with its unspeakable, incredible tale of renewed outrage: once more the weird, semi-human offender was abroad, once more his anthropophagic lust had taken toll from among the honorable denizens of Commorion. He had eaten no less a personage than one of the eight judges; and, not satisfied with

picking the bones of this rather obese individual, had devoured by way of dessert the more outstanding facial features of one of the police who had tried to deter him from finishing his main course. All this, as before, was done amid the frantic protests of a great throng. After a final nibbling at the scant vestiges of the unfortunate constable's left ear, Knygathin Zhaum had seemed to experience a feeling of repletion and had suffered himself to be led docilely away once more by the jailers.

I, and the others who had helped me in the arduous toils of entombment, were more than astounded when we heard the news. And the effect on the general public was indeed deplorable. The more superstitious and timid began leaving the city forthwith; and there was much revival of forgotten prophecies; and much talk among the various priesthoods anent the necessity of placating with liberal sacrifice their mystically angered gods and eidolons. Such nonsense I was wholly able to disregard; but, under the circumstances, the persistent return of Knygathin Zhaum was no less alarming to science than to religion.

We examined the tomb, if only as a matter of form; and found that certain of the superincumbent boulders had been displaced in such a manner as to admit the outward passage of a body with the lateral dimensions of some large snake or musk-rat. The sarcophagus, with its metal bolts, was bursten at one end; and we shuddered to think of the immeasurable force that must have been employed in its disruption.

Because of the way in which the case overpassed all known biologic laws, the formalities of civil law were now waived; and I, Athammaus, was called upon that same day before the sun had reached its meridian, and was solemnly charged with the office of re-beheading Knygathin Zhaum at once. The interment or other disposal of the remains was left to my

discretion; and the local soldiery and constabulary were all placed at my command, if I should require them.

Deeply conscious of the honor thus implied, and sorely perplexed but undaunted, I went forth to the scene of my labors. When the criminal reappeared, it was obvious not only to me but to everyone that his physical personality, in achieving this new recrudescence, had undergone a most salient change. His mottling had developed more than a suggestion of some startling and repulsive pattern; and his human characteristics had yielded to the inroads of an unearthly distortion. The head was joined to the shoulders almost without the intermediation of a neck; the eyes were set diagonally in a face with oblique bulgings and flattenings; the nose and mouth were showing a tendency to displace each other; and there were still further alterations which I shall not specify, since they involved an abhorrent degradation of man's noblest and most distinctive corporeal members. I shall, however, mention the strange, pendulous formations, like annulated dew-laps or wattles, into which his knee-caps had evolved. Nathless, it was Knygathin Zhaum himself who stood (if one could dignify the fashion of his carriage by that word) before the block of justice.

Because of the virtual non-existence of a nape, the third beheading called for a precision of eye and a nicety of hand which, in all likelihood, no other headsman than myself could have shown. I rejoice to say that my skill was adequate to the demand thus made upon it; and once again the culprit was shorn of his vile cephaloid appendage. But if the blade had gone even a little to either side, the dismemberment entailed would have been technically of another sort than decapitation.

The laborious care with which I and my assistants conducted the third inhumation was indeed deserving of success. We laid the body in a strong sarcophagus of bronze, and the head in a second but smaller sarcophagus of

the same material. The lids were then soldered down with molten metal; and after this the two sarcophagi were conveyed to opposite parts of Commorion. The one containing the body was buried at a great depth beneath monumental masses of stone; but that which enclosed the head I left uninterred, proposing to watch over it all night in company with a guard of armed men. I also appointed a numerous guard to keep vigil above the burial-place of the body.

Night came; and with seven trusty trident-bearers I went forth to the place where we had left the smaller of the two sarcophagi. This was in the courtyard of a deserted mansion amid the suburbs, far from the haunts of the populace. For weapons, I myself wore a short falchion and carried a great bill. We took along a plentiful supply of torches, so that we might not lack for light in our gruesome vigil; and we fit several of them at once and stuck them in crevices between the flag-stones of the court, in such wise that they formed a circle of lurid flames about the sarcophagus.

We had also brought with us an abundance of the crimson *foum*-wine in leathern bottles, and dice of mammoth-ivory with which to beguile the black nocturnal hours; and eyeing our charge with a casual but careful vigilance, we applied ourselves discreetly to the wine and began to play for small sums of no more than five *pazoors*, as is the wont of good gamblers till they have taken their opponents' measure.

The darkness deepened apace; and in the square of sapphire overhead, to which the illumination of our torches had given a jetty tinge, we saw Polaris and the red planets that looked down for the last time upon Commorion in her glory. But we dreamed not of the nearness of disaster, but jested bravely and drank in ribald mockery to the monstrous head that was now so securely confined and so remotely sundered from its odious body. The wine passed and re-passed among us; and its rosy spirit mounted in our brains;

and we played for bolder stakes; and the game quickened to a goodly frenzy.

I know not how many stars had gone over us in the smoky heavens, nor how many times I had availed myself of the ever-circling bottles. But I remember well that I had won no less than ninety *pazoors* from the trident-bearers, who were all swearing lustily and loudly as they strove in vain to stem the tide of my victory. I, as well as the others, had wholly forgotten the object of our vigil.

The sarcophagus containing the head was one that had been primarily designed for the reception of a small child. Its present use, one might have argued, was a sinful and sacrilegious waste of fine bronze; but nothing else of proper size and adequate strength was available at the time. In the mounting fervor of the game, as I have hinted, we had all ceased to watch this receptacle; and I shudder to think how long there may have been something visibly or even audibly amiss before the unwonted and terrifying behavior of the sarcophagus was forced upon our attention. It was the sudden, loud, metallic clangor, like that of a smitten gong or shield, which made us realize that all things were not as they should have been; and turning unanimously in the direction of the sound, we saw that the sarcophagus was heaving and pitching in a most unseemly fashion amid its ring of flaring torches. First on one end or corner, then on another, it danced and pirouetted, clanging resonantly all the while on the granite pavement.

The true horror of the situation had scarcely seeped into our brains, ere a new and even more ghastly development occurred. We saw that the casket was bulging ominously at top and sides and bottom, and was rapidly losing all similitude to its rightful form. Its rectangular outlines swelled and curved and were horribly erased as in the changes of a nightmare, till the thing became a slightly oblong sphere; and then, with a most appalling noise, it

began to split at the welded edges of the lid, and burst violently asunder. Through the long, ragged rift there poured in hellish ebullition a dark, ever-swelling mass of incognizable matter, frothing as with the venomous foam of a million serpents, hissing as with the yeast of fermenting wine, and putting forth here and there great sooty-looking bubbles that were large as pig-bladders. Overturning several of the torches, it rolled in an inundating wave across the flagstones and we all sprang back in the most abominable fright and stupefaction to avoid it.

Cowering against the rear wall of the courtyard, while the overthrown torches flickered wildly and smokily, we watched the remarkable actions of the mass, which had paused as if to collect itself, and was now subsiding like a sort of infernal dough. It shrank, it fell in, till after awhile its dimensions began to re-approach those of the encoffined head, though they still lacked any true semblance of its shape. The thing became a round, blackish ball, on whose palpitating surface the nascent outlines of random features were limned with the flatness of a drawing. There was one lidless eye, tawny, pupilless and phosphoric, that stared upon us from the center of the ball while the thing appeared to be making up its mind. It lay still for more than a minute; then, with a catapulting bound, it sprang past us toward the open entrance of the courtyard, and disappeared from our ken on the midnight streets.

Despite our amazement and disconcertion, we were able to note the general direction in which it had gone. This, to our further terror and confoundment, was toward the portion of Commorion in which the body of Knygathin Zhaum had been intombed. We dared not conjecture the meaning of it all, and the probable outcome. But, though there were a million fears and apprehensions to deter us, we seized our weapons and followed on the

path of that unholy head with all the immediacy and all the forthrightness of motion which a goodly cargo of *foum*-wine would permit.

No one other than ourselves was abroad at an hour when even the most dissolute revellers had either gone home or had succumbed to their potations under tavern tables. The streets were dark, and were somehow drear and cheerless; and the stars above them were half-stifled as by the invading mist of a pestilential miasma. We went on, following a main street, and the pavements echoed to our tread in the stillness with a hollow sound, as if the solid stone beneath them had been honeycombed with mausolean vaults in the interim of our weird vigil.

In all our wanderings, we found no sign of that supremely noxious and execrable thing which had issued from the riven sarcophagus. Nor, to our relief, and contrary to all our fears, did we encounter anything of an allied or analogous nature, such as might be abroad if our surmises were correct. But, near the central square of Commorion, we met with a number of men, carrying bills and tridents and torches, who proved to be the guards I had posted that evening above the tomb of Knygathin Zhaum's body. These men were in a state of pitiable agitation; and they told us a fearsome tale, of how the deep-hewn tomb and the monumental blocks of stone that were piled within it had heaved as with the throes of earthquake; and of how a python-shapen mass of frothing and hissing matter had poured forth from amid the blocks and had vanished into the darkness toward Commorion. In return, we told them of that which had happened during our vigil in the courtyard; and we all agreed that a great foulness, a thing more baneful than beast or serpent, was again loose and ravening in the night. And we spoke only in shocked whispers of what the morrow might declare.

Uniting our forces, we searched the city, combing cautiously its alleys and its thoroughfares and dreading with the dread of brave men the dark,

iniquitous spawn on which the light of our torches might fail at any turn or in any nook or portal. But the search was vain; and the stars grew faint above us in a livid sky; and the dawn came in among the marble spires with a glimmering of ghostly silver; and a thin, phantasmal amber was sifted on walls and pavements.

Soon there were footsteps other than ours that echoed through the town; and one by one the familiar clangors and clamors of life awoke. Early passers appeared; and the sellers of fruits and milk and legumes came in from the country-side. But of that which we sought there was still no trace.

We went on, while the city continued to resume its matutinal activities around us. Then, abruptly, with no warning, and under circumstances that would have startled the most robust and affrayed the most valorous, we came upon our quarry. We were entering the square in which was the *eighon*-block whereon so many thousand miscreants had laid their piacular necks, when we heard an outcry of mortal dread and agony such as only one thing in the world could have occasioned. Hurrying on, we saw that two wayfarers, who had been crossing the square near the block of justice, were struggling and writhing in the clutch of an unequalled monster which both natural history and fable would have repudiated.

In spite of the baffling, ambiguous oddities which the thing displayed, we identified it as Knygathin Zhaum when we drew closer. The head, in its third re-union with that detestable torso, had attached itself in a semi-flattened manner to the region of the lower chest and diaphragm; and during the process of this novel coalescence, one eye had slipped away from all relation with its fellow or the head and was now occupying the navel, just below the embossment of the chin. Other and even more shocking alterations had occurred: the arms had lengthened into tentacles, with fingers that were like knots of writhing vipers; and where the head would

normally have been, the shoulders had reared themselves to a cone-shaped eminence that ended in a cup-like mouth. Most fabulous and impossible of all, however, were the changes in the nether limbs: at each knee and hip, they had re-bifurcated into long, lithe proboscides that were lined with throated suckers. By making a combined use of its various mouths and members, the abnormality was devouring both of the hapless persons whom it had seized.

Drawn by the outcries, a crowd gathered behind us as we neared this atrocious tableau. The whole city seemed to fill with a well-nigh instantaneous clamor, an ever-swelling hubbub, in which the dominant note was one of supreme, all-devastating terror.

I shall not speak of our feelings as officers and men. It was plain to us that the ultra-mundane factors in Knygathin Zhaum's ancestry had asserted themselves with a hideously accelerative ratio, following his latest resurrection. But, maugre this, and the wholly stupendous enormity of the miscreation before us, we were still prepared to fulfill our duty and defend as best we could the helpless populace. I boast not of the heroism required: we were simple men, and should have done only that which we were visibly called upon to do.

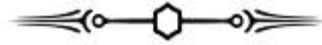
We surrounded the monster, and would have assailed it immediately with our bills and tridents. But here an embarrassing difficulty disclosed itself: the creature before us had entwined itself so tortuously and inextricably with its prey, and the whole group was writhing and tossing so violently, that we could not use our weapons without grave danger of impaling or otherwise injuring our two fellow-citizens. At length, however, the strugglings and heavings grew less vehement, as the substance and life-blood of the men was consumed; and the loathsome mass of devourer and devoured became gradually quiescent.

Now, if ever, was our opportunity; and I am sure we should all have rallied to the attack, useless and vain as it would certainly have been. But plainly the monster had grown weary of all such trifling and would no longer submit himself to the petty annoyance of human molestation. As we raised our weapons and made ready to strike, the thing drew back, still carrying its vein-drawn, flaccid victims, and climbed upon the *eighon*-block. Here, before the eyes of all assembled, it began to swell in every part, in every member, as if it were inflating itself with a superhuman rancor and malignity. The rate at which the swelling progressed, and the proportions which the thing attained as it covered the block from sight and lapsed down on every side with undulating, inundating folds, would have been enough to daunt the heroes of remotest myth. The bloating of the main torso, I might add, was more lateral than vertical. When the abnormality began to present dimensions that were beyond those of any creature of this world, and to bulge aggressively toward us with a slow, interminable stretching of boa-like arms, my valiant and redoubtable companions were scarcely to be censured for retreating. And even less can I blame the general population, who were now evacuating Commorion in torrential multitudes, with shrill cries and wailings. Their flight was no doubt accelerated by the vocal sounds, which, for the first time during our observation, were being emitted by the monster. These sounds partook of the character of hissings more than anything else; but their volume was overpowering, their timbre was a torment and a nausea to the ear; and, worst of all, they were issuing not only from the diaphragmic mouth but from each of the various other oral openings or suckers which the horror had developed. Even I, Athammaus, drew back from those hissings and stood well beyond reach of the coiling serpentine fingers.

I am proud to say, however, that I lingered on the edge of the empty square for some time, with more than one backward and regretful glance. The thing that had been Knygathin Zhaum was seemingly content with its triumph; and it brooded supine and mountainous above the vanquished *eighon*-block. Its myriad hisses sank to a slow, minor sibilation such as might issue from a family of somnolent pythons; and it made no overt attempt to assail or even approach me. But seeing at last that the professional problem which it offered was quite insoluble; and divining moreover that Commoriom was by now entirely without a king, a judicial system, a constabulary or a people, I finally abandoned the doomed city and followed the others.

The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqquan

I



“GIVE, GIVE, O magnanimous and liberal lord of the poor,” cried the beggar.

Avoosl Wuthoqquan, the richest and most avaricious money-lender in all Commoriom, and, by that token, in the whole of Hyperborea, was startled from his train of reverie by the sharp, eerie, cicada-like voice. He eyed the suppliant with acidulous disfavor. His meditations, as he walked homeward that evening, had been splendidly replete with the shining of costly metals, with coins and ingots and gold-work and argentry, and the flaming or sparkling of many-tinted gems in rills, rivers and cascades, all flowing toward the coffers of Avoosl Wuthoqquan. Now the vision had flown; and this untimely and obstreporous voice was imploring for alms.

“I have nothing for you.” His tones were like the grating of a shut clasp.

“Only two pazoors, O generous one, and I will prophesy.”

Avoosl Wuthoqquan gave the beggar a second glance. He had never seen so disreputable a specimen of the mendicant class in all his wayfarings through Commoriom. The man was preposterously old, and his mummy-brown skin, wherever visible, was webbed with wrinkles that were like the heavy weaving of some giant jungle-spider. His rags were no less than fabulous; and the beard that hung down and mingled with them was hoary as the moss of a primeval juniper.

“I do not require your prophecies.”

“One pazor then.”

“No.”

The eyes of the beggar became evil and malignant in their hollow sockets, like the heads of two poisonous little pit-vipers in their holes.

“Then, O Avoosl Wuthoqqan,” he hissed, “I will prophesy gratis. Harken to your weird: the godless and exceeding love which you bear to all material things, and your lust therefor, shall lead you on a strange quest and bring you to a doom whereof the stars and the sun will alike be ignorant. The hidden opulence of earth shall allure you and ensnare you; and earth itself shall devour you at the last.”

“Begone,” said Avoosl Wuthoqqan. “The weird is more than a trifle cryptic in its earlier clauses; and the final clause is somewhat platitudinous. I do not need a beggar to tell me the common fate of mortality.”

II

It was many moons later, in that year which became known to preglacial historians as the year of the Black Tiger.

Avoosl Wuthoqqan sat in a lower chamber of his house, which was also his place of business. The room was obliquely shafted by the brief, aerial gold of the reddening sunset, which fell through a crystal window, lighting a serpentine line of irised sparks in the jewel-studded lamp that hung from copper chains, and touching to fiery life the tortuous threads of silver and similar in the dark arrases. Avoosl Wuthoqqan, seated in an umber shadow beyond the aisle of light, peered with an austere and ironic mien at his client, whose swarthy face and somber mantle were gilded by the passing glory.

The man was a stranger; possibly a travelling merchant from outland realms, the usurer thought — or else an outlander of more dubious occupation. His narrow, slanting, beryl-green eye, his bluish, unkempt

beard, and the uncouth cut of his sad raiment, were sufficient proof of his alienage in Commorion.

“Three hundred djals is a large sum,” said the money-lender thoughtfully. “Moreover, I do not know you. What security have you to offer?”

The visitor produced from the bosom of his garment a small bag of tiger-skin, tied at the mouth with sinew, and opening the bag with a deft movement, poured on the table before Avoosl Wuthoqqan two uncut emeralds of immense size and flawless purity. They flamed at the heart with a cold and ice-green fire as they caught the slanting sunset; and a greedy spark was kindled in the eyes of the usurer. But he spoke coolly and indifferently.

“It may be that I can loan you one hundred and fifty djals. Emeralds are hard to dispose of; and if you should not return to claim the gems and pay me the money, I might have reason to repent my generosity. But I will take the hazard.”

“The loan I ask is a mere tithe of their value,” protested the stranger. “Give me two hundred and fifty djals... There are other money-lenders in Commorion, I am told.”

“Two hundred djals is the most I can offer. It is true that the gems are not without value. But you may have stolen them. How am I to know? It is not my habit to ask indiscreet questions.”

“Take them,” said the stranger, hastily. He accepted the silver coins which Avoosl Wuthoqqan counted out, and offered no further protest. The usurer watched him with a sardonic smile as he departed, and drew his own inferences. He felt sure that the jewels had been stolen, but was in no wise perturbed or disquieted by this fact. No matter who they had belonged to, or what their history, they would form a welcome and valuable addition to the

coffers of Avoosl Wuthoqquan. Even the smaller of the two emeralds would have been absurdly cheap at three hundred djals; but the usurer felt no apprehension that the stranger would return to claim them at any time... No, the man was plainly a thief, and had been glad to rid himself of the evidence of his guilt. As to the rightful ownership of the gems — that was hardly a matter to arouse the concern or the curiosity of the money-lender. They were his own property now, by virtue of the sum in silver which had tacitly been regarded by himself and the stranger as a price rather than a mere loan.

The sunset faded swiftly from the room, and a brown twilight began to dull the metal broideries of the curtains and the colored eyes of the gems. Avoosl Wuthoqquan lit the fretted lamp; and then, opening a small brazen strongbox, he poured from it a flashing rill of jewels on the table beside the emeralds. There were pale and ice-clear topazes from Mhu Thulan, and gorgeous crystals of tourmaline from Tscho Vulpanomi; there were chill and furtive sapphires of the north, and arctic carnelians like frozen blood, and diamonds that were hearted with white stars. Red, unblinking rubies glared from the coruscating pile, chatoyants shone like the eyes of tigers, garnets and alibraundines gave their somber flames to the lamplight amid the restless hues of opals. Also, there were other emeralds, but none so large and flawless as the two that he had acquired that evening.

Avoosl Wuthoqquan sorted out the gems in gleaming rows and circles, as he had done so many times before; and he set apart all the emeralds with his new acquisitions at one end, like captains leading a file. He was well pleased with his bargain, well satisfied with his overflowing caskets. He regarded the jewels with an avaricious love, a miserly complacence; and one might have thought that his eyes were little beads of jasper, set in his leathery face as in the smoky parchment cover of some olden book of doubtful magic. Money and precious gems — these things alone, he

thought, were immutable and non-volatile in a world of never-ceasing change and fugacity.

His reflections, at this point, were interrupted by a singular occurrence. Suddenly and without warning — for he had not touched or disturbed them in any manner — the two large emeralds started to roll away from their companions on the smooth, level table of black ogga-wood; and before the startled money-lender could put out his hand to stop them, they had vanished over the opposite edge and had fallen with a muffled rattling on the carpeted floor.

Such behavior was highly eccentric and peculiar, not to say unaccountable; but the usurer leapt to his feet with no other thought save to retrieve the jewels. He rounded the table in time to see that they had continued their mysterious rolling and were slipping through the outer door, which the stranger in departing had left slightly ajar. This door gave on a courtyard; and the courtyard, in turn, opened on the streets of Commorion.

Avoosl Wuthoqquan was deeply alarmed, but was more concerned by the prospect of losing the emeralds than by the eeriness and mystery of their departure. He gave chase with an agility of which few would have believed him capable, and throwing open the door, he saw the fugitive emeralds gliding with an uncanny smoothness and swiftness across the rough, irregular flags of the courtyard. The twilight was deepening to a nocturnal blue; but the jewels seemed to wink derisively with a strange phosphoric luster as he followed them. Clearly visible in the gloom, they passed through the unbarred gate that gave on a principal avenue, and disappeared.

It began to occur to Avoosl Wuthoqquan that the jewels were bewitched; but not even in the face of an unknown sorcery was he willing to relinquish anything for which he had paid the munificent sum of two hundred djals.

He gained the open street with a running leap, and paused only to make sure of the direction in which his emeralds had gone.

The dim avenue was almost entirely deserted; for the worthy citizens of Commorion, at that hour, were preoccupied with the consumption of their evening meal. The jewels, gaining momentum, and skimming the ground lightly in their flight, were speeding away on the left toward the less reputable suburbs and the wild, luxuriant jungle beyond. Avoosl Wuthoqquan saw that he must redouble his pursuit if he were to overtake them.

Panting and wheezing valiantly with the unfamiliar exertion, he renewed the chase; but in spite of all his efforts, the jewels ran always at the same distance before him, with a maddening ease and eerie volitation, tinkling musically at whiles on the pavement. The frantic and bewildered usurer was soon out of breath; and being compelled to slacken his speed, he feared to lose sight of the eloping gems; but strangely, thereafterward, they ran with a slowness that corresponded to his own, maintaining ever the same interval.

The money-lender grew desperate. The flight of the emeralds was leading him into an outlying quarter of Commorion where thieves and murderers and beggars dwelt. Here he met a few passers, all of dubious character, who stared in stupefaction at the fleeing stones, but made no effort to stop them. Then the foul tenements among which he ran became smaller, with wider spaces between; and soon there were only sparse huts, where furtive lights gleamed out in the full-grown darkness, beneath the lowering frondage of high palms.

Still plainly visible, and shining with a mocking phosphorescence, the jewels fled before him on the dark road. It seemed to him, however, that he was gaining upon them a little. His flabby limbs and pursy body were faint with fatigue, and he was grievously winded, but he went on in renewed

hope, gasping with eager avarice. A full moon, large and amber-tinted, rose beyond the jungle and began to light his way.

Commorion was far behind him now; and there were no more huts on the lonely forest road, nor any other wayfarers. He shivered a little — either with fear or the chill night air; but he did not relax his pursuit. He was closing in on the emeralds, very gradually but surely; and he felt that he would recapture them soon. So engrossed was he in the weird chase, with his eyes on the ever-rolling gems, that he failed to perceive he was no longer following an open highway. Somehow, somewhere, he had taken a narrow path that wound among monstrous trees whose foliage turned the moonlight to a mesh of quicksilver with heavy, fantastic raddlings of ebony. Crouching in grotesque menace, like giant retiarii, they seemed to close in upon him from all sides. But the money-lender was oblivious of their shadowy threats, and heeded not the sinister strangeness and solitude of the jungle path, nor the dank odors that lingered beneath the trees like unseen pools.

Nearer and nearer he came to the fleeting gems, till they ran and flickered tantalizingly a little beyond his reach, and seemed to look back at him like two greenish, glowing eyes, filled with allurements and mockery. Then, as he was about to fling himself forward in a last and supreme effort to secure them, they vanished abruptly from view, as if they had been swallowed by the forest shadows that lay like sable pythons athwart the moonlit way.

Baffled and disconcerted, Avoosl Wuthoqquan paused and peered in bewilderment at the place where they had disappeared. He saw that the path ended in a cavern-mouth yawning blackly and silently before him, and leading to unknown subterranean depths. It was a doubtful and suspicious-looking cavern, fanged with sharp stones and bearded with queer grasses;

and Avoosl Wuthoqquan, in his cooler moments, would have hesitated a long while before entering it. But just then he was capable of no other impulse than the fervor of the chase and the prompting of avarice.

The cavern that had swallowed his emeralds in a fashion so nefarious was a steep incline running swiftly down into darkness. It was low and narrow, and slippery with noisome ooziings; but the money-lender was heartened as he went on by a glimpse of the glowing jewels, which seemed to float beneath him in the black air, as if to illuminate his way. The incline led to a level, winding passage, in which Avoosl Wuthoqquan began to overtake his elusive property once more; and hope flared high in his panting bosom.

The emeralds were almost within reach; then, with sleightful suddenness, they slipped from his ken beyond an abrupt angle of the passage; and following, he paused in wonder, as if halted by an irresistible hand. He was half blinded for some moments by the pale, mysterious, bluish light that poured from the roof and walls of the huge cavern into which he had emerged; and he was more than dazzled by the multi-tinted splendor that flamed and glowed and glistened and sparkled at his very feet.

He stood on a narrow ledge of stone; and the whole chamber before and beneath him, almost to the level of this ledge, was filled with jewels even as a granary is filled with grain! It was as if all the rubies, opals, beryls, diamonds, amethysts, emeralds, chrysolites, and sapphires of the world had been gathered together and poured into an immense pit. He thought that he saw his own emeralds, lying tranquilly and decorously in a nearer mound of the undulant mass; but there were so many others of like size and flawlessness that he could not be sure of them.

For a while, he could hardly believe the ineffable vision. Then, with a single cry of ecstasy, he leapt forward from the ledge, sinking almost to his

knees in the shifting and tinkling and billowing gems. In great double handfuls, he lifted the flaming and scintillating stones and let them sift between his fingers, slowly and voluptuously, to fall with a light clash on the monstrous heap. Blinking joyously, he watched the royal lights and colors run in spreading or narrowing ripples; he saw them burn like steadfast coals and secret stars, or leap out in blazing eyes that seemed to catch fire from each other.

In his most audacious dreams, the usurer had never even suspected the existence of such riches. He babbled aloud in a rhapsody of delight, as he played with the numberless gems; and he failed to perceive that he was sinking deeper with every movement into the unfathomable pit. The jewels had risen above his knees, were engulfing his pudgy thighs, before his avaricious rapture was touched by any thought of peril.

Then, startled by the realization that he was sinking into his newfound wealth as into some treacherous quicksand, he sought to extricate himself and return to the safety of the ledge. He floundered helplessly; for the moving gems gave way beneath him, and he made no progress but went deeper still, till the bright, unstable heap had risen to his waist.

Avoosl Wuthoqqan began to feel a frantic terror amid the intolerable irony of his plight. He cried out; and as if in answer, there came a loud, unctuous, evil chuckle from the cavern behind him. Twisting his fat neck with painful effort, so that he could peer over his shoulder, he saw a most peculiar entity that was crouching on a sort of shelf above the pit of jewels. The entity was wholly and outrageously unhuman; and neither did it resemble any species of animal, or any known god or demon of Hyperborea. Its aspect was not such as to lessen the alarm and panic of the money-lender; for it was very large and pale and squat, with a toad-like face and a swollen, squidgy body and numerous cuttlefish limbs or appendages.

It lay flat on the shelf, with its chinless head and long slit-like mouth overhanging the pit, and its cold, lidless eyes peering obliquely at Avoosl Wuthoqquan. The usurer was not reassured when it began to speak in a thick and loathsome voice, like the molten tallow of corpses dripping from a wizard's kettle.

“Ho! what have we here?” it said. “By the black altar of Tsathoggua, 'tis a fat money-lender, wallowing in my jewels like a lost pig in a quagmire!”

“Help me!” cried Avoosl Wuthoqquan. “See you not that I am sinking?”

The entity gave its oleaginous chuckle. “Yes, I see your predicament, of course... What are you doing here?”

“I came in search of my emeralds — two fine and flawless stones for which I have just paid the sum of two hundred djals.”

“Your emeralds?” said the entity. “I fear that I must contradict you. The jewels are mine. They were stolen not long ago from this cavern, in which I have been wont to gather and guard my subterranean wealth for many ages. The thief was frightened away... when he saw me... and I suffered him to go. He had taken only the two emeralds; and I knew that they would return to me — as my jewels always return — whenever I choose to call them. The thief was lean and bony, and I did well to let him go; for now, in place, there is a plump and well-fed usurer.”

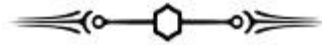
Avoosl Wuthoqquan, in his mounting terror, was barely able to comprehend the words or to grasp their implications. He had sunk slowly but steadily into the yielding pile; and green, yellow, red, and violet gems were blinking gorgeously about his bosom and sifting with a light tinkle beneath his armpits.

“Help! help!” he wailed. “I shall be engulfed!”

Grinning sardonically, and showing the cloven tip of a fat, white tongue, the singular entity slid from the shelf with boneless ease; and spreading its

flat body on the pool of gems, into which it hardly sank, it slithered forward to a position from which it could reach the frantic usurer with its octopus-like members. It dragged him free with a single motion of incredible celerity. Then, without pause or preamble or further comment, in a leisurely and methodical manner, it began to devour him.

Ubbo-Sathla



For Ubbo-Sathla is the source and the end. Before the coming of Zhothaquah or Yok-Zothoth or Kthulhut from the stars, Ubbo-Sathla dwelt in the steaming fens of the newmade Earth: a mass without head or members, spawning the grey, formless efts of the prime and the grisly prototypes of terrene life... And all earthly life, it is told, shall go back at last through the great circle of time to Ubbo-Sathla.

— THE BOOK OF EIBON.

PAUL TREGARDIS FOUND the milky crystal in a litter of oddments from many lands and eras. He had entered the shop of the curio-dealer through an aimless impulse, with no particular object in mind, other than the idle distraction of eyeing and fingering a miscellany of far-gathered things. Looking desultorily about, his attention had been drawn by a dull glimmering on one of the tables; and he had extricated the queer orb-like stone from its shadowy, crowded position between an ugly little Aztec idol, the fossil egg of a dinornis, and an obscene fetich of black wood from the Niger.

The thing was about the size of a small orange and was slightly flattened at the ends, like a planet at its poles. It puzzled Tregardis, for it was not like an ordinary crystal, being cloudy and changeable, with an intermittent glowing in its heart, as if it were alternately illumed and darkened from within. Holding it to the wintry window, he studied it for awhile without being able to determine the secret of this singular and regular alternation. His puzzlement was soon complicated by a dawning sense of vague and

irrecognizable familiarity, as if he had seen the thing before under circumstances that were now wholly forgotten.

He appealed to the curio-dealer, a dwarfish Hebrew with an air of dusty antiquity, who gave the impression of being lost to commercial considerations in some web of cabbalistic revery.

“Can you tell me anything about this?”

The dealer gave an indescribable, simultaneous shrug of his shoulders and his eye-brows.

“It is very old — palaeogean, one might say. I cannot tell you much, for little is known. A geologist found it in Greenland, beneath glacial ice, in the Miocene strata. Who knows? It may have belonged to some sorcerer of primeval Thule. Greenland was a warm, fertile region, beneath the sun of Miocene times. No doubt it is a magic crystal; and a man might behold strange visions in its heart, if he looked long enough.”

Tregardis was quite startled; for the dealer’s apparently fantastic suggestion had brought to mind his own delvings in a branch of obscure lore; and, in particular, had recalled *The Book of Eibon*, that strangest and rarest of occult forgotten volumes, which is said to have come down through a series of manifold translations from a prehistoric original written in the lost language of Hyperborea. Tregardis, with much difficulty, had obtained the medieval French version — a copy that had been owned by many generations of sorcerers and Satanists — but had never been able to find the Greek manuscript from which the version was derived.

The remote, fabulous original was supposed to have been the work of a great Hyperborean wizard, from whom it had taken its name. It was a collection of dark and baleful myths, of liturgies, rituals and incantations both evil and esoteric. Not without shudders, in the course of studies that the average person would have considered more than singular, Tregardis

had collated the French volume with the frightful *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred. He had found many correspondences of the blackest and most appalling significance, together with much forbidden data that was either unknown to the Arab or omitted by him ... or by his translators.

Was this what he had been trying to recall, Tregardis wondered? — the brief, casual reference, in *The Book of Eibon*, to a cloudy crystal that had been owned by the wizard Zon Mezzamalech, in Mhu Thulan? Of course, it was all too fantastic, too hypothetic, too incredible — but Mhu Thulan, that northern portion of ancient Hyperborea, was supposed to have corresponded roughly with Modern Greenland, which had formerly been joined as a peninsula to the main continent. Could the stone in his hand, by some fabulous fortuity, be the crystal of Zon Mezzamalech?

Tregardis smiled at himself with inward irony for even conceiving the absurd notion. Such things did not occur — at least, not in present-day London; and in all likelihood. The *Book of Eibon* was sheer superstitious fantasy, anyway. Nevertheless, there was something about the crystal that continued to tease and inveigle him. He ended by purchasing it, at a fairly moderate price. The sum was named by the seller and paid by the buyer without bargaining.

With the crystal in his pocket, Paul Tregardis hastened back to his lodgings instead of resuming his leisurely saunter. He installed the milky globe on his writing table, where it stood firmly enough on one of its oblate ends. Then, still smiling at his own absurdity, he took down the yellow parchment manuscript of *The Book of Eibon* from its place in a somewhat inclusive collection of *recherché* literature. He opened the vermiculated leather cover with hasps of tarnished steel, and read over to himself, translating from the archaic French as he read, the paragraph that referred to Zon Mezzamalech:

“This wizard, who was mighty among sorcerers, had found a cloudy stone, orb-like and somewhat flattened at the ends, in which he could behold many visions of the terrene past, even to the Earth’s beginning, when Ubbo-Sathla, the unbegotten source, lay vast and swollen and yeasty amid the vapping slime... But of that which he beheld, Zon Mezzamalech left little record; and people say that he vanished presently, in a way that is not known; and after him the cloudy crystal was lost.”

Paul Tregardis laid the manuscript aside. Again there was something that tantalized and beguiled him, like a lost dream or a memory forfeit to oblivion. Impelled by a feeling which he did not scrutinize or question, he sat down before the table and began to stare intently into the cold, nebulous orb. He felt an expectation which, somehow, was so familiar, so permeative a part of his consciousness, that he did not even name it to himself.

Minute by minute he sat, and watched the alternate glimmering and fading of the mysterious light in the heart of the crystal. By imperceptible degrees, there stole upon him a sense of dreamlike duality, both in respect to his person and his surroundings. He was still Paul Tregardis — and yet he was someone else; the room was his London apartment — and a chamber in some foreign but well-known place. *And in both milieus he peered steadfastly into the same crystal.*

After an interim, without surprise on the part of Tregardis, the process of re-identification became complete. He knew that he was Zon Mezzamalech, a sorcerer of Mhu Thulan, and a student of all lore anterior to his own epoch. Wise with dreadful secrets that were not known to Paul Tregardis, amateur of anthropology and the occult sciences in latter-day London, he sought by means of the milky crystal to attain an even older and more fearful knowledge.

He had acquired the stone in dubitable ways, from a more than sinister source. It was unique and without fellow in any land or time. In its depths, all former years, all things that have ever been, were supposedly mirrored, and would reveal themselves to the patient visionary. And through the crystal, Zon Mezzamalech had dreamt to recover the wisdom of the gods who died before the Earth was born. They had passed to the lightless void, leaving their lore inscribed upon tablets of ultra-stellar stone; and the tablets were guarded in the primal mire by the formless, idiotic demiurge, Ubbo-Sathla. Only by means of the crystal could he hope to find and read the tablets.

For the first time, he was making trial of the globe's reputed virtues. About him an ivory-panelled chamber, filled with his magic books and paraphernalia, was fading slowly from his consciousness. Before him, on a table of some dark Hyperborean wood that had been graven with grotesque ciphers, the crystal appeared to swell and deepen, and in its filmy depth he beheld a swift and broken swirling of dim scenes, fleeting like the bubbles of a millrace. As if he looked upon an actual world, cities, forests, mountains, seas and meadows flowed beneath him, lightening and darkening as with the passage of days and nights in some weirdly accelerated stream of time.

Zon Mezzamalech had forgotten Paul Tregardis — had lost the remembrance of his own entity and his own surroundings in Mhu Thulan. Moment by moment, the flowing vision in the crystal became more definite and distinct, and the orb itself deepened till he grew giddy, as if he were peering from an insecure height into some never-fathomed abyss. He knew that time was racing backward in the crystal, was unrolling for him the pageant of all past days; but a strange alarm had seized him, and he feared

to gaze longer. Like one who has nearly fallen from a precipice, he caught himself with a violent start and drew back from the mystic orb.

Again, to his gaze, the enormous whirling world into which he had peered was a small and cloudy crystal on his rune-wrought table in Mhu Thulan. Then, by degrees, it seemed that the great room with sculptured panels of mammoth ivory was narrowing to another and dingier place; and Zon Mezzamalech, losing his preternatural wisdom and sorcerous power, went back by a weird regression into Paul Tregardis.

And yet not wholly, it seemed, was he able to return. Tregardis, dazed and wondering, found himself before the writing table on which he had set the oblate sphere. He felt the confusion of one who has dreamt and has not yet fully awakened from the dream. The room puzzled him vaguely, as if something were wrong with its size and furnishings; and his remembrance of purchasing the crystal from a curio-dealer was oddly and discrepantly mingled with an impression that he had acquired it in a very different manner.

He felt that something very strange had happened to him when he peered into the crystal; but just what it was he could not seem to recollect. It had left him in the sort of psychic muddlement that follows a debauch of hashish. He assured himself that he was Paul Tregardis, that he lived on a certain street in London, that the year was 1932; but such common-place verities had somehow lost their meaning and their validity; and everything about him was shadow-like and insubstantial. The very walls seemed to waver like smoke; the people in the streets were phantoms of phantoms; and he himself was a lost shadow, a wandering echo of something long forgot.

He resolved that he would not repeat his experiment of crystal-gazing. The effects were too unpleasant and equivocal. But the very next day, by an unreasoning impulse to which he yielded almost mechanically, without

reluctation, he found himself seated before the misty orb. Again he became the sorcerer Zon Mezzamalech in Mhu Thulan; again he dreamt to retrieve the wisdom of the antemundane gods; again he drew back from the deepening crystal with the terror of one who fears to fall; and once more — but doubtfully and dimly, like a failing wraith — he was Paul Tregardis.

Three times did Tregardis repeat the experience on successive days; and each time his own person and the world about him became more tenuous and confused than before. His sensations were those of a dreamer who is on the verge of waking; and London itself was unreal as the lands that slip from the dreamer's ken, receding in filmy mist and cloudy light. Beyond it all, he felt the looming and crowding of vast imageries, alien but half-familiar. It was as if the phantasmagoria of time and space were dissolving about him, to reveal some veritable reality — or another dream of space and time.

There came, at last, the day when he sat down before the crystal — and did not return as Paul Tregardis. It was the day when Zon Mezzamalech, boldly disregarding certain evil and portentous warnings, resolved to overcome his curious fear of failing bodily into the visionary world that he beheld — a fear that had hitherto prevented him from following the backward stream of time for any distance. He must, he assured himself, conquer this fear if he were ever to see and read the lost tablets of the gods. He had beheld nothing more than a few fragments of the years of Mhu Thulan immediately posterior to the present — the years of his own lifetime; and there were inestimable cycles between these years and the Beginning.

Again, to his gaze, the crystal deepened immeasurably, with scenes and happenings that flowed in a retrograde stream. Again the magic ciphers of the dark table faded from his ken, and the sorcerously carved walls of his

chamber melted into less than dream. Once more he grew giddy with an awful vertigo as he bent above the swirling and milling of the terrible gulfs of time in the worldlike orb. Fearfully, in spite of his resolution, he would have drawn away; but he had looked and leaned too long. There was a sense of abysmal falling, a suction as of ineluctable winds, of maelstroms that bore him down through fleet unstable visions of his own past life into antenatal years and dimensions. He seemed to endure the pangs of an inverse dissolution; and then he was no longer Zon Mezzamalech, the wise and learned watcher of the crystal, but an actual part of the weirdly racing stream that ran back to re-attain the Beginning.

He seemed to live unnumbered lives, to die myriad deaths, forgetting each time the death and life that had gone before. He fought as a warrior in half-legendary battles; he was a child playing in the ruins of some olden city of Mhu Thulan; he was the king who had reigned when the city was in its prime, the prophet who had foretold its building and its doom. A woman, he wept for the bygone dead in necropoli long-crumbled; an antique wizard, he muttered the rude spells of earlier sorcery; a priest of some pre-human god, he wielded the sacrificial knife in cave-temples of pillared basalt. Life by life, era by era, he re-traced the long and groping cycles through which Hyperborea had risen from savagery to a high civilization.

He became a barbarian of some troglodytic tribe, fleeing from the slow, turreted ice of a former glacial age into lands illumed by the ruddy flare of perpetual volcanoes. Then, after incomputable years, he was no longer man, but a man-like beast, roving in forests of giant fern and calamite, or building an uncouth nest in the boughs of mighty cycads.

Through aeons of anterior sensation, of crude lust and hunger, of aboriginal terror and madness, there was someone — or something — that went ever backward in time. Death became birth, and birth was death. In a

slow vision of reverse change, the earth appeared to melt away, and sloughed off the hills and mountains of its latter strata. Always the sun grew larger and hotter above the fuming swamps that teemed with a crasser life, with a more fulsome vegetation. And the thing that had been Paul Tregardis, that had been Zon Mezzamalech, was a part of all the monstrous devolution. It flew with the claw-tipped wings of a pterodactyl, it swam in tepid seas with the vast, winding bulk of an ichthyosaurus, it bellowed uncouthly with the armored throat of some forgotten behemoth to the huge moon that burned through primordial mists.

At length, after aeons of immemorial brutehood, it became one of the lost serpent-men who reared their cities of black gneiss and fought their venomous wars in the world's first continent. It walked undulously in ante-human streets, in strange crooked vaults; it peered at primeval stars from high, Babelian towers; it bowed with hissing litanies to great serpent-idols. Through years and ages of the ophidian era it returned, and was a thing that crawled in the ooze, that had not yet learned to think and dream and build. And the time came when there was no longer a continent, but only a vast, chaotic marsh, a sea of slime, without limit or horizon, without shore or elevation, that seethed with a blind writhing of amorphous vapors.

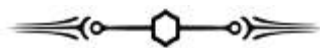
There, in the grey beginning of Earth, the formless mass that was Ubbo-Sathla reposed amid the slime and the vapors. Headless, without organs or members, it sloughed from its oozy sides, in a slow, ceaseless wave, the amoebic forms that were the archetypes of earthly life. Horrible it was, if there had been aught to apprehend the horror; and loathsome, if there had been any to feel loathing. About it, prone or tilted in the mire, there lay the mighty tablets of star-quarried stone that were writ with the inconceivable wisdom of the pre-mundane gods.

And there, to the goal of a forgotten search, was drawn the thing that had been — or would sometime be — Paul Tregardis and Zon Mezzamalech. Becoming a shapeless eft of the prime, it crawled sluggishly and obliviously across the fallen tablets of the gods, and fought and ravened blindly with the other spawn of Ubbo-Sathla.

* * *

Of Zon Mezzamalech and his vanishing, there is no mention anywhere, save the brief passage in *The Book of Eibon*. Concerning Paul Tregardis, who also disappeared, there was a curt notice in several of the London papers. No one seems to have known anything about him: he is gone as if he had never been; and the crystal, presumably, is gone too. At least, no one has found it.

The Monster of the Prophecy



A DISMAL, FOG-DANK afternoon was turning into a murky twilight when Theophilus Alvor paused on Brooklyn Bridge to peer down at the dim river with a shudder of sinister surmise. He was wondering how it would feel to cast himself into the chill, turbid waters, and whether he could summon up the necessary courage for an act which, he persuaded himself, was now becoming inevitable as well as laudable. He felt that he was too weary, sick and disheartened to go on with the evil dream of existence.

From any human standpoint, there was doubtless abundant reason for Alvor's depression. Young, and full of unquenched visions and desires, he had come to Brooklyn from an up-stage village three months before, hoping to find a publisher for his writings; but his old-fashioned classic verses, in spite (or because) of their high imaginative fire, had been unanimously rejected both by magazines and book-firms. Though Alvor had lived frugally and had chosen lodgings so humble as almost to constitute the proverbial poetic garret, the small sun of his savings was now exhausted. He was not only quite penniless, but his clothes were so worn as to be no longer presentable in editorial offices, and the soles of his shoes were becoming rapidly nonexistent from the tramping he had done. He had not eaten for days, and his last meal, like the several preceding ones, had been at the expense of his soft-hearted Irish landlady.

For more reasons than one, Alvor would have preferred another death than that of drowning. The foul and icy waters were not inviting from an esthetic viewpoint; and in spite of all he had heard to the contrary, he did not believe that such a death could be anything but disagreeable and

painful. By choice he would have selected a sovereign Oriental opiate, whose insidious slumber would have led through a realm of gorgeous dreams to the gentle night of an ultimate oblivion; or, failing this, a deadly poison of merciful swiftness. But such Lethean media are not readily obtainable by a man with an empty purse.

Damning his own lack of forethought in not reserving enough money for such an eventuation, Alvor shuddered on the twilight bridge, and looked at the dismal waters, and then at the no less dismal fog through which the troubled lights of the city had begun to break. And then, through the instinctive habit of a country-bred person who is also imaginative and beauty-seeking, he looked at the heavens above the city to see if any stars were visible. He thought of his recent Ode to Antares, which, unlike his earlier productions, was written in vers libre and had a strong modernistic irony mingled with its planturous lyricism. It had, however, proved as unsalable as the rest of his poems. Now, with a sense of irony far more bitter than that which he had put into his ode, he looked for the ruddy spark of Antares itself, but was unable to find it in the sodden sky. His gaze and his thoughts returned to the river.

‘There is no need for that, my young friend,’ said a voice at his elbow. Alvor was startled not only by the words and by the clairvoyance they betrayed, but also by something that was unanalyzably strange in the tones of the voice that uttered them. The tones were both refined and authoritative; but in them there was a quality which, for lack of more precise words or imagery, he could think of only as metallic and unhuman. While his mind wrestled with swiftborn unseizable fantasies, he turned to look at the stranger who had accosted him.

The man was neither uncommonly nor disproportionately tall; and he was modishly dressed, with a long overcoat and top hat. His features were

not unusual, from what could be seen of them in the dusk, except for his full-lidded and burning eyes, like those of some nyctalopic animal. But from him there emanated a palpable sense of things that were inconceivably strange and *outré* and remote — a sense that was more patent, more insistent than any impression of mere form and odor and sound could have been, and which was well-nigh tactual in its intensity.

‘I repeat,’ continued the man, ‘that there is no necessity for you to drown yourself in that river. A vastly different fate can be yours, if you choose... In the meanwhile, I shall be honored and delighted if you will accompany me to my house, which is not far away.’

In a daze of astonishment preclusive of all analytical thought, or even of any clear cognizance of where he was going or what was happening, Alvor followed the stranger for several blocks in the swirling fog. Hardly knowing how he had come there, he found himself in the library of an old house which must in its time have had considerable pretensions to aristocratic dignity, for the paneling, carpet and furniture were all antique and were both rare and luxurious.

The poet was left alone for a few minutes in the library. Then his host reappeared and led him to a dining-room where an excellent meal for two had been brought in from a neighboring restaurant. Alvor, who was faint with inanition, ate with no attempt to conceal his ravening appetite, but noticed that the stranger made scarcely even a pretense of touching his own food. With a manner preoccupied and distrait, the man sat opposite Alvor, giving no more ostensible heed to his guest than the ordinary courtesies of a host required.

‘We will talk now,’ said the stranger, when Alvor had finished. The poet, whose energies and mental faculties had been revived by the food, became bold enough to survey his host with a frank attempt at appraisal. He saw a

man of indefinite age, whose lineaments and complexion were Caucasian, but whose nationality he was unable to determine. The eyes had lost something of their weird luminosity beneath the electric light, but nevertheless they were most remarkable, and from them there poured a sense of unearthly knowledge and power and strangeness not to be formulated by human thought or conveyed in human speech. Under his scrutiny, vague, dazzling, intricate unshapable images rose of the dim borders of the poet's mind and fell back into oblivion ere he could envisage them. Apparently without rime or reason, some lines of his Ode to Antares returned to him, and he found that he was repeating them over and over beneath his breath:

'Star of strange hope,
Pharos beyond our desperate mire,
Lord of unscalable gulfs,
Lamp of unknowable life.'

The hopeless, half-satiric yearning for another sphere which he had expressed in this poem, haunted his thoughts with a weird insistence.

'Of course, you have no idea who or what I am,' said the stranger, 'though your poetic intuitions are groping darkly toward the secret of my identity. On my part, there is no need for me to ask you anything, since I have already learned all that there is to learn about your life, your personality, and the dismal predicament from which I am now able to offer you a means of escape. Your name is Theophilus Alvor, and you are a poet whose classic style and romantic genius are not likely to win adequate recognition in this age and land. With an inspiration more prophetic than you dream, you have written, among other masterpieces, a quite admirable Ode to Antares.'

‘How do you know all this?’ cried Alvor.

‘To those who have the sensory apparatus with which to perceive them, thoughts are no less audible than spoken words. I can hear your thoughts, so you will readily understand that there is nothing surprising in my possession of more or less knowledge concerning you.’

‘But who are you?’ exclaimed Alvor. ‘I have heard of people who could read the minds of others; but I did not believe that there was any human being who actually possessed such powers.’

‘I am not a human being,’ rejoined the stranger, ‘even though I have found it convenient to don the semblance of one for a while just as you or another of your race might wear a masquerade costume. Permit me to introduce myself: my name, as nearly as can be conveyed in the phonetics of your world, is Vizaphmal, and I have come from a planet of the far-off mighty sun that is known to you as Antares. In my own world, I am a scientist, though the more ignorant classes look upon me as a wizard. In the course of profound experiments and researches, I have invented a device which enables me at will to visit other planets, no matter how remote in space. I have sojourned for varying intervals in more than one solar system; and I have found your world and its inhabitants so quaint and curious and monstrous that I have lingered here a little longer than I intended, because of my taste for the bizarre — a taste which is ineradicable, though no doubt reprehensible. It is now time for me to return: urgent duties call me, and I can not tarry. But there are reasons why I should like to take with me to my world a member of your race; and when I saw you on the bridge tonight, it occurred to me that you might be willing to undertake such an adventure. You are, I believe, utterly weary of the sphere in which you find yourself, since a little while ago you were ready to depart from it into the unknown dimension that you call death. I can offer you something much more

agreeable and diversified than death, with a scope of sensation, a potentiality of experience beyond anything of which you have had even the faintest intimation in the poetic reveries looked upon as extravagant by your fellows.'

Again and again, while listening to this long and singular address, Alvor seemed to catch in the tones of the voice that uttered it a supervening resonance, a vibration of overtones beyond the compass of a mortal throat. Though perfectly clear and correct in all details of enunciation, there was a hint of vowels and consonants not to be found in any terrestrial alphabet. However, the logical part of his mind refused to accept entirely these intimations of the supermundane; and he was now seized by the idea that the man before him was some new type of lunatic.

'Your thought is natural enough, considering the limitations of your experience,' observed the stranger calmly. 'However, I can easily convince you of its error by revealing myself to you in my true shape.'

He made the gesture of one who throws off a garment. Alvor was blinded by an insufferable blaze of light, whose white glare, emanating in huge beams from an orb-like center, filled the entire room and seemed to pass illimitably beyond through dissolving walls. When his eyes became accustomed to the light, he saw before him a being who had no conceivable likeness to his host. This being was more than seven feet in height, and had no less than five intricately jointed arms and three legs that were equally elaborate. His head, on a long, swan-like neck, was equipped not only with visual, auditory, nasal and oral organs of unfamiliar types, but had several appendages whose use was not readily to be determined. His three eyes, obliquely set and with oval pupils, rayed forth a green phosphorescence; the mouth, or what appeared to be such, was very small and had the lines of a downward-curving crescent; the nose was rudimentary, though with finely

wrought nostrils; in lieu of eyebrows, he had a triple series of semicircular markings on his forehead, each of a different hue; and above his intellectually shapen head, above the tiny drooping ears with their complex lobes, there towered a gorgeous comb of crimson, not dissimilar in form to the crest on the helmet of a Grecian warrior. The head, the limbs and the whole body were mottled with interchanging lunes and moons of opalescent colors, never the same for a moment in their unresting flux and reflux.

Alvor had the sensation of standing on the rim of prodigious gulfs, on a new earth beneath new heavens; and the vistas of illimitable horizons, fraught with the multitudinous terror and manifold beauty of an imagery no human eye had ever seen, hovered and wavered and flashed upon him with the same unstable fluorescence as the lunar variegations of the body at which he stared with such stupefaction. Then, in a little while, the strange light seemed to withdraw upon itself, retracting all its beams to a common center, and faded in a whirl of darkness. When this darkness had cleared away, he saw once more the form of his host, in conventional garb, with a slight ironic smile about his lips.

‘Do you believe me now?’ Vizaphmal queried.

‘Yes, I believe you.’

‘Are you willing to accept my offer?’

‘I accept it.’ A thousand questions were forming in Alvor’s mind, but he dared not ask them. Divining these questions, the stranger spoke as follows:

‘You wonder how it is possible for me to assume a human shape. I assure you, it is merely a matter of taking thought. My mental images are infinitely clearer and stronger than those of any earth-being, and by conceiving myself as a man, I can appear to you and your fellows as such.

‘You wonder also as to the modus operandi of my arrival on earth. This I shall now show and explain to you, if you will follow me.’

He led the way to an upper story of the old mansion. Here in a sort of attic, beneath a large skylight in the southward-sloping roof, there stood a curious mechanism, wrought of a dark metal which Alvor could not identify. It was a tall, complicated framework with many transverse bars and two stout upright rods terminating at each end in a single heavy disk. These disks seemed to form the main portions of the top and bottom.

‘Put your hand between the bars,’ commanded Alvor’s host.

Alvor tried to obey this command, but his fingers met with an adamantine obstruction, and he realized that the intervals of the bars were filled with an unknown material clearer than glass or crystal.

‘You behold here,’ said Vizaphmal, ‘an invention which, I flatter myself, is quite unique anywhere this side of the galactic suns. The disks at top and bottom are a vibratory device with a twofold use; and no other material than that of which they are wrought would have the same properties, the same achievable rates of vibrations. When you and I have locked ourselves within the framework, as we shall do anon, a few revolutions of the lower disk will have the effect of isolating us from our present environment, and we shall find ourselves in the midst of what is known to you as space, or ether. The vibrations of the upper disk, which we shall then employ, are of such potency as to annihilate space itself in any direction desired. Space, like everything else in the atomic universe, is subject to laws of integration and dissolution. It was merely a matter of finding the vibrational power that would affect this dissolution; and, by untiring research, by ceaseless experimentation, I located and isolated the rare metallic elements which, in a state of union, are capable of this power.’

While the poet was pondering all he had seen and heard, Vizaphmal touched a tiny knob, and one side of the framework swung open. He then turned off the electric light in the garret, and simultaneously with its

extinction, a ruddy glow filled the interior of the machine, serving to illumine all the parts, but leaving the room around it in darkness. Standing beside his invention, Vizaphmal looked at the skylight, and Alvor followed his gaze. The fog had cleared away and many stars were out, including the red gleam of Antares, now high in the south. The stranger was evidently making certain preliminary calculations, for he moved the machine a little after peering at the star, and adjusted a number of fine wires in the interior, as if he were tuning some stringed instrument.

At last he turned to Alvor.

Everything is now in readiness,' he announced. 'If you are still prepared to accompany me, we will take our departure.'

Alvor was conscious of an unexpected coolness and fortitude as he answered: 'I am at your service.' The unparalleled occurrences and disclosures of the evening, the wellnigh undreamable prospect of a plunge across untold immensitude, such as no man had been privileged to dare before, had really benumbed his imagination, and he was unable at the moment to conceive the true awesomeness of what he had undertaken.

Vizaphmal indicated the place where Alvor was to stand in the machine. The poet entered, and assumed a position between one of the upright rods and the side, opposite Vizaphmal. He found that a layer of the transparent material was interposed between his feet and the large disk in which the rods were based. No sooner had he stationed himself, than, with a celerity and an utter silence that were uncanny, the framework closed upon itself with hermetic tightness, till the jointure where it had happened was no longer detectable.

'We are now in a sealed compartment,' explained the Antarean, 'into which nothing can penetrate. Both the dark metal and the crystalline are substances that refuse the passage of heat and cold, of air and ether, or of

any known cosmic ray, with the one exception of light itself, which is admitted by the clear metal.'

When he ceased, Alvor realized that they were walled about with an insulating silence utter and absolute as that of some intersidereal void. The traffic in the streets without, the rumbling and roaring and jarring of the great city, so loud a minute before, might have been a million miles away in some other world for all that he could hear or feel of its vibration.

In the red glow that pervaded the machine, emanating from a source he could not discover, the poet gazed at his companion. Vizaphmal had now resumed his Antarean form, as if all necessity for a human disguise were at an end, and he towered above Alvor, glorious with intermerging zones of fluctuant colors, where hues the poet had not seen in any spectrum were simultaneous or intermittent with flaming blues and coruscating emeralds and amethysts and fulgorant and vermilions and saffrons. Lifting one of his five arms, which terminated in two finger-like appendages with many joints all capable of bending in any direction, the Antarean touched a thin wire that was stretched overhead between the two rods. He plucked at this wire like a musician at a lute-string, and from it there emanated a single clear note higher in pitch than anything Alvor had ever heard. Its sheer unearthly acuity caused a shudder of anguish to run through the poet, and he could scarcely have borne a prolongation of the sound, which, however, ceased in a moment and was followed by a much more endurable humming and singing noise which seemed to arise at his feet. Looking down, he saw that the large disk at the bottom of the medial rods had begun to revolve. This revolution was slow at first, but rapidly increased in its rate, till he could no longer see the movement; and the singing sound became agonizingly sweet and high till it pierced his senses like a knife.

Vizaphmal touched a second wire, and the revolution of the disk was brought abruptly to an end. Alvor felt an unspeakable relief at the cessation of the torturing music.

‘We are now in etheric space,’ the Antarean declared. ‘Look out, if you so desire.’

Alvor peered through the interstices of the dark metal, and saw around and above and below them the unlimited blackness of cosmic night and the teeming of uncountable trillions of stars. He had a sensation of frightful and deadly vertigo, and staggered like a drunken man as he tried to keep himself from falling against the side of the machine.

Vizaphmal plucked at a third wire, but this time Alvor was not aware of any sound. Something that was like an electric shock, and also like the crushing impact of a heavy blow, descended upon his head and shook him to the soles of his feet. Then he felt as if his tissues were being stabbed by innumerable needles of fire, and then that he was being torn apart in a thousand fragments, bone by bone, muscle by muscle, vein by vein, and nerve by nerve, on some invisible rack. He swooned and fell huddled in a corner of the machine, but his unconsciousness was not altogether complete. He seemed to be drowning beneath an infinite sea of darkness, beneath the accumulation of shoreless gulfs, and above this sea, so far away that he lost it again and again, there thrilled a supernal melody, sweet as the singing of sirens or the fabled music of the spheres, together with an insupportable dissonance like the shattering of all the battlements of time. He thought that all his nerves had been elongated to an immense distance, where the outlying parts of himself were being tortured in the oubliettes of fantastic inquisitions by the use of instruments of percussion, diabolically vibrant, that were somehow identified with certain of his own body-cells. Once he thought that he saw Vizaphmal standing a million leagues remote

on the shore of an alien planet, with a sky of soaring many-colored flame behind him and the night of all the universe rippling gently at his feet like a submissive ocean. Then he lost the vision, and the intervals of the far unearthly music became more prolonged, and at last he could not hear it at all, nor could he feel any longer the torturing of his remote nerve-ends. The gulf deepened above him, and he sank through eons of darkness and emptiness to the very nadir of oblivion.

Alvor's return to consciousness was even more slow and gradual than his descent into Lethe had been. Still lying at the bottom of a shoreless and boundless night, he became aware of an unidentifiable odor with which in some way the sense of ardent warmth was associated. This odor changed incessantly, as if it were composed of many diverse ingredients, each of which predominated in turn. Myrrh-like and mystic in the beginning as the of an antique altar, it assumed the heavy languor of unimaginable flowers, the sharp sting of vaporizing chemicals unknown to science, the smell of exotic water and exotic earth, and then a medley of other elements that conveyed no suggestion of anything whatever, except of evolutionary realms and rages that were beyond all human experience or calculation. For a while he lived and was awake only in his sensory response to this potpourri of odors; then the awareness of his own corporeal being came back to him through tactual sensations of an unusual order, which he did not at first recognize as being within himself, but which seemed to be those of a foreign entity in some other dimension, with whom he was connected across unbridgeable gulfs by a nexus of gossamer tenuity. This entity, he thought, was reclining on a material of great softness, into which he sank with a supreme and leaden indolence and a feeling of sheer bodily weight that held him utterly motionless. Then, floating along the ebon cycles of the void, this being came with ineffable slowness toward Alvor, and at last, by

no perceptible transition, by no breach of physical logic or mental congruity, was incorporate with him. Then a tiny light, like a star burning all alone in the center of infinitude, began to dawn far off; and it drew nearer and nearer and grew larger and larger till it turned the black void to a dazzling luminescence, to a many-tinted glory that smote full upon Alvor.

He found that he was lying with wide-open eyes on a huge couch, in a sort of pavilion consisting of a low and elliptical dome supported on double rows of diagonally fluted pillars. He was quite naked, though a sheet of some thin and pale yellow fabric had been thrown across his lower limbs. He saw at a glance, even though his brain centers were still half benumbed as by the action of some opiate, that this fabric was not the product of any terrestrial loom. Beneath his body, the couch was covered with gray and purple stuffs, but whether they were made of feathers, fur or cloth he was quite uncertain, for they suggested all three of these materials. They were very thick and resilient, and accounted for the sense of extreme softness underneath him that marked his return from the swoon. The couch itself stood higher above the floor than an ordinary bed, and was also longer, and in his half-narcotized condition this troubled Alvor even more than other aspects of his situation which were far less normal and explicable.

Amazement grew upon him as he looked about with reviving faculties, for all that he saw and smelt and touched was totally foreign and unaccountable. The floor of the pavilion was wrought in a geometric marquetry of ovals, rhomboids and equilaterals, in white, black and yellow metals that no earthly mine had ever disclosed; and the pillars were of the same three metals, regularly alternating. The dome alone was entirely of yellow. Not far from the couch, there stood on a squat tripod a dark and widemouthed vessel from which poured an opalescent vapor. Someone standing behind it, invisible through the cloud of gorgeous fumes, was

fanning the vapor toward Alvor. He recognized it as the source of the myrh-like odor that had first troubled his reanimating senses. It was quite agreeable but was borne away from him again and again by gusts of hot wind which brought into the pavilion a mixture of perfumes that were both sweet and acrid and were altogether novel. Looking between the pillars, he saw the monstrous heads of towering blossoms with pagoda-like tiers of sultry, sullen petals, and beyond them a terraced landscape of low hills of mauve and nacarat soil, extending toward a horizon incredibly remote, till they rose and rose against the heavens. Above all this was a whitish sky, filled with a blinding radiation of intense light from a sun that was now hidden by the dome. Alvor's eyes began to ache, the odors disturbed and oppressed him, and he was possessed by a terrible dubiety and perplexity, amid which he remembered vaguely his meeting with Vizaphmal, and the events preceding his swoon. He was unbearably nervous, and for some time all his ideas and sensations took on the painful disorder and irrational fears of incipient delirium.

A figure stepped from behind the veering vapors and approached the couch. It was Vizaphmal, who bore in one of his five hands the large thin circular fan of bluish metal he had been using. He was holding in another hand a tubular cup, half full of an erubescient liquid.

'Drink this,' he ordered, as he put the cup to Alvor's lips. The liquid was so bitter and fiery that Alvor could swallow it only in sips, between periods of gasping and coughing. But once he had gotten it down, his brain cleared with celerity and all his sensations were soon comparatively normal.

'Where am I?' he asked. His voice sounded very strange and unfamiliar to him, and its effect bordered upon ventriloquism — which, as he afterward learned, was due to certain peculiarities of the atmospheric medium.

‘You are on my country estate, in Ulphalor, a kingdom which occupies the whole northern hemisphere of Satabbor, the inmost planet of Sanarda, that sun which is called Antares in your world. You have been unconscious for three of our days, a result which I anticipated, knowing the profound shock your nervous system would receive from the experience through which you have passed. However, I do not think you will suffer any permanent illness or inconvenience; and I have just now administered, to you a sovereign drug which will aid in the adjustment of your nerves and your corporeal functions to the novel conditions under which you are to live henceforward. I employed the opalescent vapor to arouse you from your swoon, when I deemed that it had become safe and wise to do this. The vapor is produced by the burning of an aromatic seaweed, and is magisterial in its restorative effect.’

Alvor tried to grasp the full meaning of this information, but his brain was still unable to receive anything more than a *mélange* of impressions that were totally new and obscure and outlandish. As he pondered the words of Vizaphmal, he saw that rays of bright light had fallen between the columns and were creeping across the floor. Then the rim of a vast ember-colored sun descended below the rim of the dome and he felt an overwhelming, but somehow not insupportable, warmth. His eyes no longer ached, not even in the direct beams of this luminary; nor did the perfumes irritate him, as they had done for a while.

‘I think,’ said Vizaphmal, ‘that you may now arise. It is afternoon, and there is much for you to learn, and much to be done.’

Alvor threw off the thin covering of yellow cloth, and sat up, with his legs hanging over the edge of the couch.

‘But my clothing?’ he queried. ‘You will need none in our climate. No one has ever worn anything of the sort in Satabbor.’

Alvor digested this idea, and though he was slightly disconcerted, he made up his mind that he would accustom himself to whatever should be required of him. Anyway, the lack of his usual habiliments was far from disagreeable in the dry, sultry air of this new world.

He slid from the couch to the floor, which was nearly five feet below him, and took several steps. He was not weak or dizzy, as he had half expected, but all his movements were characterized by the same sense of extreme bodily weight of which he had been dimly aware while still in a semi-conscious condition.

‘The world in which you now dwell is somewhat larger than your own,’ explained Vizaphmal, ‘and the force of gravity is proportionately greater. Your weight has been increased by no less than a third; but I think you will soon become habituated to this, as well as to the other novelties of your situation.’

Motioning the poet to follow him, he led the way through that portion of the pavilion which had been behind Alvor’s head as he lay on the couch. A spiral bridge of ascending stairs ran from this pavilion to a much larger pile where numerous wings and annexes of the same aerial architecture of domes and columns flared from a central edifice with a circular wall and many thin spires. Below the bridge, about the pavilion, and around the whole edifice above, were gardens of trees and flowers that caused Alvor to recall the things he had seen during his one experiment with hashish. The foliage of the trees was either very fine and hair-like, or else it consisted of huge, semi-globular and discoid forms depending from horizontal branches and suggesting a novel union of fruit and leaf. Almost all colors, even green, were shown in the bark and foliage of these trees. The flowers were mainly similar to those Alvor had seen from the pavilion, but there were others of a short, puffy-stemmed variety, with no trace of leaves, and with

malignant purpleblack heads full of crimson mouths, which swayed a little even when there was no wind. There were oval pools and meandering streams of a dark water with irisated glints all through this garden, which, with the columnar edifice, occupied the middle of a small plateau.

As Alvor followed his guide along the bridge, a perspective of hills and plains all marked out in geometric diamonds and squares and triangles, with a large lake or inland sea in their midst, was revealed momentarily. Far in the distance, more than a hundred leagues away, were the gleaming domes and towers of some baroque city, toward which the enormous orb of the sun was now declining. When he looked at this sun and saw the whole extent of its diameter for the first time, he felt an overpowering thrill of imaginative awe and wonder and exultation at the thought that it was identical with the red star to which he had addressed in another world the half-lyric, half-ironic lines of his ode.

At the end of the spiral bridge, they came to a second and more spacious pavilion, in which stood a high table with many seats attached to it by means of curving rods. Table and chairs were of the same material, a light, grayish metal. As they entered this pavilion, two strange beings appeared and bowed before Vizaphmal. They resembled the scientist in their organic structure, but were not so tall and their coloring was very drab and dark, with no hint of opalescence. By certain bizarre indications Alvor surmised that the two beings were of different sexes.

‘You are right,’ said Vizaphmal, reading his thoughts. ‘These persons are a male and female of the two inferior sexes called Abbars, who constitute the workers, as well as the breeders, of our world. There are two superior sexes, who are sterile, and who form the intellectual, esthetic and ruling classes, to whom I belong. We call ourselves the Alphads. The Abbars are more numerous, but we hold them in close subjection; and even though they

are our parents as well as our slaves, the ideas of filial piety which prevail in your world would be regarded as truly singular by us. We supervise their breeding, so that the due proportion of Abbars and Alphads may be maintained, and the character of the progeny is determined by the injection of certain serums at the time of conceiving. We ourselves, though sterile, are capable of what you call love, and our amorous delights are more complex than yours in their nature.'

He now turned and addressed the two Abbars. The phonetic forms and combinations that issued from his lips were unbelievably different from those of the scholarly English in which he had spoken to Alvor. There were strange gutturals and linguals and oddly prolonged vowels which Alvor, for all his subsequent attempts to learn the language, could never quite approximate and which argued a basic divergence in the structure of the vocal organs of Vizaphmal from that of his own.

Bowing till their heads almost touched the floor, the two Abbars disappeared among the columns in a wing of the building and soon returned, carrying long trays on which were unknown foods and beverages in utensils of unearthly forms.

'Be seated,' said Vizaphmal. The meal that followed was far from unpleasant, and the foodstuffs were quite palatable, though Alvor was not sure whether they were meats or vegetables. He learned that they were really both, for his host explained that they were the prepared fruits of plants which were half animal in their cellular composition and characteristics. These plants grew wild, and were hunted with the same care that would be required in hunting dangerous beasts, on account of their mobile branches and the poisonous darts with which they were armed. The two beverages were a pale, colorless wine with an acrid flavor, made from a

root, and a dusky, sweetish liquid, the natural water of this world. Alvor noticed that the water had a saline after-taste.

‘The time has now come,’ announced Vizaphmal at the end of the meal, ‘to explain frankly the reason why I have brought you here. We will now adjourn to that portion of my home which you would term a laboratory, or work-shop, and which also includes my library.’

They passed through several pavilions and winding colonnades, and reached the circular wall at the core of the edifice. Here a high narrow door, engraved with heteroclitic ciphers, gave admission to a huge room without windows, lit by a yellow glow whose cause was not ascertainable.

‘The walls and ceiling are lined with a radio-active substance, said Vizaphmal, ‘which affords this illumination. The vibrations of this substance are also highly stimulating to the processes of thought.’

Alvor looked about him at the room, which was filled with alembics and cupels and retorts and sundry other scientific mechanisms, all of unfamiliar types and materials. He could not even surmise their use. Beyond them, in a corner, he saw the apparatus of intersecting bars, with the two heavy disks, in which he and Vizaphmal had made their passage through etheric space. Around the walls there were a number of deep shelves, laden with great rolls like the volumes of the ancients.

Vizaphmal selected one of these rolls, and started to unfurl it. It was four feet wide, was gray in color, and was closely written with many columns of dark violet and maroon characters that ran horizontally instead of up and down.

‘It will be necessary,’ said Vizaphmal, ‘to tell you a few facts regarding the history, religion and intellectual temper of our world, before I read to you the singular prophecy contained in one of the columns of this ancient chronicle.’

‘We are a very old people, and the beginnings, or even the first maturity of our civilization, antedate the appearance of the lowliest forms of life on your earth. Religious sentiment and the veneration of the past have always been dominant factors among us, and have shaped our history to an amazing extent. Even today, the whole mass of the Abbars and the majority of the Alphads are immersed in superstition, and the veriest details of quotidian life are regulated by sacerdotal law. A few scientists and thinkers, like myself, are above all such puerilities; but, strictly between you and me, the Alphads, for all their superior and highly aristocratic traits, are mainly the victims of arrested development in this regard. They have cultivated the epicurean and esthetic side of life to a high degree, they are accomplished artists, sybarites and able administrators or politicians; but, intellectually, they have not freed themselves from the chains of a sterile pantheism and an all too prolific priesthood.

‘Several cycles ago, in what might be called an early period of our history, the worship of all our sundry deities was at its height. There was at this time a veritable eruption, a universal plague of prophets; who termed themselves the voices of the gods, even as similarly-minded persons have done in your world. Each of these prophets made his own especial job-lot of predictions, often quite minutely worked out and elaborate, and sometimes far from lacking in imaginative quality. A number of these prophecies have since been fulfilled to the letter, which, as you may well surmise, has helped enormously in confirming the hold of religion. However, between ourselves, I suspect that their fulfillment has had behind it more or less of a shrewd instrumentality, supplied by those who could profit therefrom in one way or another.

‘There was one vates, Abbolechiolor by name, who was even more fertile-minded and long-winded than his fellows. I shall now translate to

you, from the volumen I have just unrolled, a prediction that he made in the year 299 of the cycle of Sargholoth, the third of the seven epochs into which our known history has been subdivided. It runs thus:

‘When, for the second time following this prediction, the two outmost moons of Satabbor shall be simultaneously darkened in a total eclipse by the third and innermost moon, and when the dim night of this occultation shall have worn away in the dawn, a mighty wizard shall appear in the city of Sarpoulom, before the palace of the kings of Ulphalor, accompanied by a most unique and unheard-of monster with two arms, two legs, two eyes and a white skin. And he that then rules in Ulphalor shall be deposed ere noon of this day, the wizard shall be enthroned in his place, to reign as long as the white monster shall abide with him.’ Vizaphmal paused, as if to give Alvor a chance to cogitate the matters that had been presented to him. Then, while his three eyes assumed a look of quizzical sharpness and shrewdness, he continued:

‘Since the promulgation of this prophecy, there has already been one total edipse of our two outer moons by the inner one. And, according to all the calculations of our astronomers, in which I can find no possible flaw, a second similar eclipse is now about to take place — in fact, it is due this very night. If Abbolechiolor was truly inspired, tomorrow morn is the time when the prophecy will be fulfilled. However, I decided some while ago that its fuulfilment should not be left to chance; and one of my purposes in designing the mechanism with which I visited your world, was to find a monster who would meet the specifications of Abbolechiolor. No creature of this anomalous kind has ever been known, or even fabled, to exist in Satabbor; and I made a thorough search of many remote and outlying planets without being able to obtain what I required. In some of these worlds there were monsters of very uncommon types, with an almost

unlimited number of visual organs and limbs; but the variety to which you belong, with only two eyes, two arms and two legs, must indeed be rare throughout the infra-galactic universe, since I have not discovered it in any other planet than your own.

‘I am sure that you now conceive the project I have long nurtured. You and I will appear at dawn in Sarpoulom, the capital of ulphalor, whose domes and towers you saw this afternoon far off on the plain. Because of the celebrated prophecy, and the publicly known calculations regarding the imminence of a second two-fold eclipse, a great crowd will doubtless be gathered before the palace of the kings to await whatever shall occur. Akkiel, the present king, is by no means popular, and your advent in company with me, who am widely famed as a wizard, will be the signal for his dethronement. I shall then be ruler in his place, even as Abbolechiolor has so thoughtfully predicted. The holding of supreme temporal power in Ulphalor is not undesirable, even for one who is wise and learned and above most of the vanities of life, as I am. When this honor has devolved upon my unworthy shoulders, I shall be able to offer you, as a reward for your miraculous aid, an existence of rare and sybaritic luxury, of rich and varied sensation, such as you can hardly have imagined. It is true, no doubt, that you will be doomed to a certain loneliness among us: you will always be looked upon as a monster, a portentous anomaly; but such, I believe was your lot in the world where I found you and where you were about to cast yourself into a most unpleasant river. There, as you have learned, all poets are regarded as no less anomalous than double-headed snakes or five-legged calves.’

Alvor had listened to this speech in manifold and ever-increasing amazement. Toward the end, when there was no longer any doubt concerning Vizaphmal’s intention, he felt the sting of a bitter and curious

irony at the thought of the role he was destined to play. However, he could do no less than admit the cogency of Vizaphmal's final argument.

'I trust,' said Vizaphmal, 'that I have not injured your feelings by my frankness, or by the position in which I am about to place you.'

'Oh, no, not at all,' Alvor hastened to assure him.

'In that case, we shall soon begin our journey to Sarpoulom, which will take all night. Of course, we could make the trip in the flash of an instant with my space-annihilator, or in a few minutes with one of the air-machines that have long been employed among us. But I intend to use a very old-fashioned mode of conveyance for the occasion, so that we will arrive in the proper style, at the proper time, and also that you may enjoy our scenery and view the double eclipse at leisure.'

When they emerged from the windowless room, the colonnades and pavilions without were full of a rosy light, though the sun was still an hour above the horizon. This, Alvor learned, was the usual prelude of a Satabborian sunset. He and Vizaphmal watched while the whole landscape before them became steeped in the ruddy glow, which deepened through shades of cinaabar and ruby to a rich garnet by the time Aatares had begun to sink from sight. When the huge orb had disappeared, the intervening lands took on a fiery amethyst, and tall auroral flames of a hundred hues shot upward to the zenith from the sunken sun. Alvor was spellbound by the glory of the spectacle.

Turning from this magnificent display at an unfamiliar sound, he saw that a singular vehicle had been brought by the Abbars to the steps of the pavilion in which they stood. It was more like a chariot than anything else, and was drawn by three animals undreamt of in human fable or heraldry. These animals were black and hairless, their bodies were extremely long, each of them had eight legs and a forked tail, and their whole aspect,

including their flat, venomous, triangular heads, was uncomfortably serpentine. A series of green and scarlet wattles hung from their throats and bellies, and semi-translucent membranes, erigible at will, were attached to their sides.

‘You behold,’ Vizaphmal informed Alvor, ‘the traditional conveyance that has been used since time immemorial by all orthodox wizards in Ulphalor. These creatures are called orpods, and they are among the swiftest of our mammalian serpents.’

He and Alvor seated themselves in the vehicle. Then the three orpods, who had no reins in their complicated harness, started off at a word of command on a spiral road that ran from Vizaphmal’s home to the plain beneath. As they went, they erected the membranes at their sides and soon attained an amazing speed.

Now, for the first time, Alvor saw the three moons of Satabbor, which had risen opposite the afterglow. They were all large, especially the innermost one, a perceptible warmth was shed by their pink rays, and their combined illumination was nearly as clear and bright as that of a terrestrial day.

The land through which Vizaphmal and the poet now passed was uninhabited, in spite of its nearness to Sarpoulom, and they met no one. Alvor learned that the terraces he had seen upon awaking were not the work of intelligent beings, as he had thought, but were a natural formation of the hills. Vizaphmal had chosen this location for his home because of the solitude and privacy, so desirable for the scientific experiments to which he had devoted himself.

After they had traversed many leagues, they began to pass occasional houses, or a like structure to that of Vizaphmal’s. Then the road meandered along the rim of cultivated fields, which Alvor recognized as the source of

the geometric divisions he had seen from afar during the day. He was told that these fields were given mainly to the growing of root-vegetables, of a gigantic truffle, and a kind of succulent cactus, which formed the chief foods of the Abbars. The Alphads ate by choice only the meat of animals and the fruits of wild, half-animal plants, such as those with which Alvor had been served.

By midnight the three moons had drawn very close together and the second moon had begun to occlude the outermost. Then the inner moon came slowly across the others, till in an hour's time the eclipse was complete. The diminution of light was very marked, and the whole effect was now similar to that of a moonlit night on earth.

‘It will be morning in a little more than two hours,’ said Vizaphmal, ‘since our nights are extremely short at this time of year. The eclipse will be over before then. But there is no need for us to hurry.’

He spoke to the orpods, who folded their membranes and settled to a sort of trot.

Sarpoulom was now visible in the heart of the plain, and its outlines were rendered more distinct as the two hidden moons began to draw forth from the adumbration of the other. When to this triple light the ruby rays of earliest morn were added, the city loomed upon the travelers with fantastic many-storied piles of that same open type of metal architecture which the home of Vizaphmal had displayed. This architecture, Alvor found, was general throughout the land, though an older type with closed walls was occasionally to be met with, and was used altogether in the building of prisons and the inquisitions maintained by the priesthood of the various deities.

It was an incredible vision that Alvor saw — a vision of high domes upborne on slender elongated columns, tier above tier, of airy colonnades

and bridges and hanging gardens loftier than Babylon or than Babel, all tinged by the ever-changing red that accompanied and followed the Satabborian dawn, even as it had preceded the sunset. Into this vision, along streets that were paven with the same metal as that of the buildings, Alvor and Vizaphmal were drawn by the three orpods.

The poet was overcome by the sense of an unimaginably old and alien and diverse life which descended upon him from these buildings. He was surprised to find that the streets were nearly deserted and that little sign of activity was manifest anywhere. A few Abbars, now and then, scuttled away in alleys or entrances at the approach of the orpods, and two beings of a coloration similar to that of Vizaphmal, one of whom Alvor took to be a female, issued from a colonnade and stood staring at the travelers in evident stupefaction.

When they had followed a sort of winding avenue for more than a mile, Alvor saw between and above the edifices in front of them the domes and upper tiers of a building that surpassed all the others in its extent.

‘You now behold the palace of the kings of Ulphalor,’ his companion told him.

In a little while they emerged upon a great square that surrounded the palace. This square was crowded with the people of the city, who, as Vizaphmal had surmised, were all gathered to await the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the prophecy of Abbolechiolor. The open galleries and arcades of the huge edifice, which rose to a height of ten stories, were also laden with watching figures. Abbars were the most plentiful element in his throng, but there were also multitudes of the gayly colored Alphads among them.

At sight of Alvor and his companion, a perceptible movement, a sort of communal shuddering which soon grew convulsive, ran through the whole assemblage in the square and along the galleries of the edifice above. Loud

cries of a peculiar shrillness and harshness arose, there was a strident sound of beaten metal in the heart of the palace, like the gongs of an alarm, and mysterious lights glowed out and were extinguished in the higher stories. Clangors of unknown machines, the moan and roar and shriek of strange instruments, were audible above the clamor of the crowd, which grew more tumultuous and agitated in its motion. A way was opened for the car drawn by the three orpods, and Vizaphmal and Alvor soon reached the entrance of the palace.

There was an unreality about it all to Alvor, and the discomfiture he had felt in drawing upon himself the weird phosphoric gaze of ten thousand eyes, all of whom were now intent with a fearsome uncanny curiosity on every detail of his physique, was like the discomfiture of some absurd and terrible dream. The movement of the crowd had ceased, while the car was passing along the unhuman lane that had been made for it, and there was an interval of silence. Then, once more, there were babble and debate, and cries that had the accent of martial orders or summonses were caught up and repeated. The throng began to move, with a new and more concentric swirling, and the foremost ranks of Abbars and Alphads swelled like a dark and tinted wave into the colonnades of the palace. They climbed the pillars with a dreadful swift agility to the stories above, they thronged the courts and pavilions and arcades, and though a weak resistance was apparently put up by those within, there was nothing that could stem them.

Through all this clangor and clamor and tumult. Vizaphmal stood in the car with an imperturbable mien beside the poet. Soon a number of Alphads, evidently a delegation, issued from the palace and made obeisance to the wizard, whom they addressed in humble and supplicative tones.

‘A revolution has been precipitated by our advent, explained Vizaphmal, ‘and Akkiel the king has fled. The chamberlains of the court and the high

priests of all our local deities are now offering me the throne of Ulphalor. Thus the prophecy is being fulfilled to the letter. You must agree with me that the great Abbolechiolor was happily inspired.

The ceremony of Vizaphmal's enthronement was held almost immediately, in a huge hall at the core of the palace, open like all the rest of the structure, and with columns of colossal size. The throne was a great globe of azure metal, with a seat hollowed out near the top, accessible by means of a serpentine flight of stairs. Alvor, at an order issued by the wizard, was allowed to stand at the base of this globe with some of the Alphads.

The enthronement itself was quite simple. The wizard mounted the stairs, amid the silence of a multitude that had thronged the hall, and seated himself in the hollow of the great globe. Then a very tall and distinguished-looking Alphad also climbed the steps, carrying a heavy rod, one half of which was green, and the other a swart, sullen crimson, and placed this rod in the hands of Vizaphmal. Later, Alvor learned that the crimson end of this rod could emit a death-dealing ray, and the green a vibration that cured almost all the kinds of illness to which the Satabborians were subject. Thus it was more than symbolical of the twofold power of life and death with which the king had been invested.

The ceremony was now at an end, and the gathering quickly dispersed. Alvor, at the command of Vizaphmal, was installed in a suite of open apartments on the third story of the palace, at the end of many labyrinthine stairs. A dozen Abbars, who were made his personal retainers, soon came in, each carrying a different food or drink. The foods were beyond belief in their strangeness, for they included the eggs of a moth-like insect large as a plover, and the apples of a fungoid tree that grew in the craters of dead volcanoes. They were served in ewers of a white and shining mineral,

upborne on legs of fantastic length, and wrought with a cunning artistry. Likewise he was given, in shallow bowls, a liquor made from the blood-like juice of living plants, and a wine in which the narcotic pollen of some night-blooming flower had been dissolved.

The days and weeks that now followed were, for the poet, an experience beyond the visionary resources of any terrestrial drug. Step by step, he was initiated, as much as possible for one so radically alien, into the complexities and singularities of life in a new world. Gradually his nerves and his mind, by the aid of the erubescant liquid which Vizaphmal continued to administer to him at intervals, became habituated to the strong light and heat, the intense radiative properties of a soil and atmosphere with unearthly chemical constituents, the strange foods and beverages, and the people themselves with their queer anatomy and queerer customs. Tutors were engaged to teach him the language, and, in spite of the difficulties presented by certain unmanageable consonants, certain weird ululative vowels, he learned enough of it to make his simpler ideas and wants understood.

He saw Vizaphmal every day, and the new king seemed to cherish a real gratitude toward him for his indispensable aid in the fulfilment of the prophecy. Vizaphmal took pains to instruct him in regard to all that it was necessary to know, and kept him well-informed as to the progress of public events in Ulphalor. He was told, among other things, that no news had been heard concerning the whereabouts of Akkiel, the late ruler. Also, Vizaphmal had reason to be aware of more or less opposition toward himself on the part of the various priesthoods, who, in spite of his life-long discretion, had somehow learned of his free-thinking propensities.

For all the attention, kindness and service that he received, and the unique luxury with which he was surrounded, Alvor felt that these people,

even as the wizard had forewarned him, looked upon him merely as a kind of unnatural curiosity or anomaly. He was no less monstrous to them than they were to him, and the gulf created by the laws of a diverse biology, by an alien trend of evolution, seemed impossible to bridge in any manner. He was questioned by many of them, and, in especial, by more than one delegation of noted scientists, who desired to know as much as he could tell them about himself. But the queries were so patronizing, so rude and narrow-minded and scornful and smug, that he was soon wont to feign a total ignorance of the language on such occasions. Indeed, there was a gulf; and he was rendered even more acutely conscious of it whenever he met any of the female Abbars or Alphads of the court, who eyed him with disdainful inquisitiveness, and among whom a sort of tittering usually arose when he passed. His naked members, so limited in number, were obviously as great a source of astonishment to them as their own somewhat intricate and puzzling charms were to him. All of them were quite nude; indeed, nothing, not even a string of jewels or a single gem, was ever worn by any of the Satabborians. The female Alphads, like the males, were extremely tall and were gorgeous with epidermic hues that would have outdone the plumage of any peacock; and their anatomical structure was most peculiar... Alvor began to feel the loneliness of which Vizaphmal had spoken, and he was overcome at times by a great nostalgia for his own world, by a planetary homesickness. He became atrociously nervous, even if not actually ill.

While he was still in this condition, Vizaphmal took him on a tour of Ulphalor that had become necessary for political reasons. More or less incredulity concerning the real existence of such a monstrosity as Alvor had been expressed by the folk of outlying provinces, of the polar realms and the antipodes, and the new ruler felt that a visual demonstration of the two-

armed, two-legged and two-eyed phenomenon would be far from inadvisable, to establish beyond dispute the legitimacy of his own claim to the throne. In the course of this tour, they visited many unique cities, and the rural and urban centers of industries peculiar to Satabbor; and Alvor saw the mines from which the countless minerals and metals used in Ulphalor were extracted by the toil of millions of Abbars. These metals were found in a pure state, and were of inexhaustible extent. Also he saw the huge oceans, which, with certain inland seas and lakes that were fed from underground sources, formed the sole water-supply of the ageing planet, where no rain had even been rumored to fall for centuries. The sea-water, after undergoing a treatment that purged it of a number of undesirable elements, was carried all through the land by a system of conduits. Moreover, he saw the marshlands at the north pole, with their vicious tangle of animate vegetation, into which no one had even tried to penetrate.

They met many outland peoples in the course of this tour; but the general characteristics were the same throughout Ulphdor, except in one or two races of the lowest aborigines, among whom there were no Alphads. Everywhere the poet was eyed with the same cruel and ignorant curiosity that had been shown in Sarpoulom. However, he became gradually inured to this, and the varying spectades of bizarre interest and the unheard-of scenes that he saw daily, helped to divert him a little from his nostalgia for the lost earth.

When he and Vizaphmal returned to Sarpoulom, after an absence of many weeks, they found that much discontent, and revolutionary sentiment had been sown among the multitude by the hierarchies of the Satabborian gods and goddesses, particularly by the priesthood of Cunthamosi, the Cosmic Mother, a female deity in high favor among the two reproductive sexes, from whom the lower ranks of her hierophants were recruited.

Cunthamosi was worshipped as the source of all things; her maternal organs were believed to have given birth to the sun, the moon, the world, the stars, the planets and even the meteors which often fell in Satabbor. But it was argued by her priests that such a monstrosity as Alvor could not possibly have issued from her womb, and that therefore his very existence was a kind of blasphemy, and that the rule of the heretic mizard, Vizaphmal, based on the advent of this abnormality, was likewise a flagrant insult to the Cosmic Mother. They did not deny the apparently miraculous fulfilment of the prophecy of Abbolechiolor, but it was maintained that this fulfillment was no assurance of the perpetuity of Vizaphmal's reign, and no proof that his reign was countenanced by any of the gods.

'I can not conceal from you,' said Vizaphmal to Alvor, that the position in which we both stand is now slightly parlous. I intend to bring the space-annihilator from my country home to the court, since it is not impossible that I may have need of it, and that some foreign sphere will soon become more salubrious for me than my native one.'

However, it would seem that this able scientist, alert wizard and competent king had not grasped the full imminence of the danger that threatened his reign; or else he spoke, as was sometimes his wont, with sardonic moderation. He showed no further concern, beyond setting a strong guard about Alvor to attend him at all times, lest an attempt should be made to kidnap the poet in consideration of the last clause of the prophecy.

Three days after the return to Sarpoulom, while Alvor was standing in one of his private balconies looking out over the roofs of the town, with his guards chattering idly in the rooms behind, he saw that the streets were dark with a horde of people, mainly Abbars, who were streaming silently toward the palace. A few Alphads, distinguishable even at a distance by their gaudy

hues, were at the head of this throng. Alarmed at the spectacle, and remembering what the king had told him, he went to find Vizaphmal and climbed the eternal tortuous series of complicated stairs that led to the king's personal suite. Others among the inmates of the court had seen the advancing crowd, and there were agitation, terror and frantic hurry everywhere. Mounting the last flight of steps to the king's threshold, Alvor was astounded to find that many of the Abbars, who had gained ingress from the other side of the palace and had scaled the successive rows of columns and stairs with ape-like celerity, were already pouring into the room. Vizaphmal himself was standing before the open framework of the space-annihilator, which had now been installed beside his couch. The rod of royal investiture was in his hand, and he was levelling the crimson head at the foremost of the invading Abbars. As this creature leapt toward him, waving an atrocious weapon lined by a score of hooked blades, Vizaphmal tightened his hold on the rod, thus pressing a secret spring, and a thin rose-colored ray of light was emitted from the end, causing the Abbar to crumple and fall. Others, in nowise deterred, ran forward to succeed him, and the king turned his lethal beam upon them with the calm air of one who is conducting a scientific experiment, till the floor was piled with dead Abbars. Still others took their place, and some began to cast their hooked weapons at the king. None of these touched him, but he seemed to weary of the sport, and stepping within the framework, he closed it upon himself. A moment more, and then there was a roar as of a thousand thunders, and the mechanism and Vizaphmal were no longer to be seen. Never, at any future time, was the poet to learn what had become of him, nor in what stranger world than Satabbor he was now indulging his scientific fancies and curiosities.

Alvor had no time to feel, as he might conceivably have done, that he had been basely deserted by the king. All the nether and upper stories of the great edifice were now a-swarm with the invading crowd, who were no longer silent, but were uttering shrill, ferocious cries as they bore down the opposition of the courtiers and slaves. The whole place was inundated by an ever-mounting sea, in which there were now myriads of Alphads as well as of Abbars; and no escape was possible. In a few instants, Alvor himself was seized by a group of the Abbars, who seemed to have been enraged rather than terrified or discomforted by the vanishing of Vizaphmal. He recognized them as priests of Cunthamosi by an odd oval and vertical marking of red pigments on their swart bodies. They bound him viciously with cords made from the intestines of a dragon-like animal, and carried him away from the palace, along streets that were lined by a staring and glibbering mob, to a building on the southern outskirts of Sarpoulom, which Vizaphmal had once pointed out to him as the Inquisition of the Cosmic Mother.

This edifice, unlike most of the buildings in Sarpoulom, was walled on all sides and was constructed entirely of enormous gray bricks, made from the local soil, and bigger and harder than blocks of granite. In a long five-sided chamber illumined only by narrow slits in the roof, Alvor found himself arraigned before a jury of the priests, presided over by a swollen and pontifical-looking Alphad, the Grand Inquisitor.

The place was filled with ingenious and grotesque implements of torture, and the very walls were hung to the ceiling with contrivances that would have put Torquemada to shame. Some of them were very small, and were designed for the treatment of special and separate nerves; and others were intended to harrow the entire epidermic area of the body at a single twist of their screw-like mechanism.

Alvor could understand little of the charges being preferred against him, but gathered that they were the same, or included the same, of which Vizaphmal had spoken — to wit, that he, Alvor, was a monstrosity that could never have been conceived or brought forth by Cunthamosi, and whose very existence, past, present and future, was a dire affront to this divinity. The entire scene — the dark and lurid room with its array of hellish instruments, the diabolic faces of the inquisitors, and the high unhuman drone of their voices as they intoned the charges and brought judgment against Alvor — was laden with a horror beyond the horror of dreams.

Presently the Grand Inquisitor focussed the malign gleam of his three unblinking orbs upon the poet, and began to pronounce an interminable sentence, pausing a little at quite regular intervals which seemed to mark the clauses of the punishment that was to be inflicted. These clauses were well-nigh innumerable, but Alvor could comprehend almost nothing of what was said; and doubtless it was as well that, he did not comprehend.

When the voice of the swollen Alphad had ceased, the poet was led away through endless corridors and down a stairway that seemed to descend into the bowels of Satabbor. These corridors, and also the stairway, were luminous with self-emitted light that resembled the phosphorescence of decaying matter in tombs and catacombs. As Alvor went downward with his guards, who were all Abbars of the lowest type, he could hear somewhere in sealed unknowable, vaults the moan and shriek of beings who endured the ordeals imposed by the inquisitors of Cunthamosi.

They came to the final step of the stairway, where, in a vast vault, an abyss whose bottom was not discernible yawned in the center of the floor. On its edge there stood a fantastic sort of windlass on which was wound an immense coil of blackish rope.

The end of this rope was now tied about Alvor's ankles, and he was lowered head downward into the gulf by the inquisitors. The sides were not luminous like those of the stairway, and he could see nothing. But, as he descended into the gulf, the terrible discomfort of his position was increased by sensations of an ulterior origin. He felt that he was passing through a kind of hairy material with numberless filaments that clung to his head and body and limbs like minute tentacles, and whose contact gave rise to an immediate itching. The substance impeded him more and more, till at last he was held immovably suspended as in a net, and all the while the separate hairs seemed to be biting into his flesh with a million microscopic teeth, till the initial itching was followed by a burning and a deep convulsive throbbing more exquisitely painful than the flames of an auto da fe. The poet learned long afterward that the material into which he had been lowered was a subterranean organism, half vegetable, half animal, which grew from the side of the gulf, with long mobile feelers that were extremely poisonous to the touch. But at the time, not the least of the horrors he underwent was the uncertainty as to its precise nature.

After he had hung for quite a while in this agonizing web, and had become almost unconscious from the pain and the unnatural position, Alvor felt that he was being drawn upward. A thousand of the fine thread-like tentacles clung to him and his whole body was encircled with a mesh of insufferable pangs as he broke loose from them. He swooned with the intensity of this pain, and when he recovered, he was lying on the floor at the edge of the gulf, and one of the priests was prodding him with a many-pointed weapon.

Alvor gazed for a moment at the cruel visages of his tormenters, in the luminous glow from the sides of the vault, and wondered dimly what infernal torture was next to follow, in the carrying-out of the interminable

sentence that had been pronounced. He surmised, of course, that the one he had just undergone was mild in comparison to the many that would succeed it. But he never knew, for at that instant there came a crashing sound like the fall and shattering of the universe; the walls, the floor and the stairway rocked to and fro in a veritable convulsion, and the vault above was riven in sunder, letting through a rain of fragments of all sizes, some of which struck several of the inquisitors and swept them into the gulf. Others of the priests leapt over the edge in their terror, and the two who remained were in no condition to continue their official duties. Both of them were lying beside Alvor with broken heads from which, in lieu of blood, there issued a glutinous light-green liquid.

Alvor could not imagine what had happened, but knew only that he himself was unhurt, as far as the results of the cataclysm were concerned. His mental state was not one to admit of scientific surmise: he was sick and dizzy from the ordeal he had suffered, and his whole body was swollen, was blood-red and violently burning from the touch of the organisms in the gulf. He had, however, enough strength and presence of mind to grope with his bound hands for the weapon that had been dropped by one of the inquisitors. By much patience, by untiring ingenuity, he was able to cut the thongs about his wrists and ankles on the sharp blade of one of the five points.

Carrying this weapon, which he knew that he might need, he began the ascent of the subterranean stairway. The steps were half blocked by fallen masses of stone, and some of the landings and stairs, as well as the sides of the wall, were cloven with enormous rents; and his egress was by no means an easy matter. When he reached the top, he found that the whole edifice was a pile of shattered walls, with a great pit in its center from which a

cloud of vapors issued. An immense meteor had fallen, and had struck the Inquisition of the Cosmic Mother.

Alvor was in no condition to appreciate the irony of this event, but at least he was able to comprehend his chance of freedom. The only inquisitors now visible were lying with squashed bodies whose heads or feet protruded from beneath the large squares of overthrown brick, and Alvor lost no time in quitting the vicinity.

It was now night, and only one of the three moons had arisen. Alvor struck off through the level arid country to the south of Sarpoulom, where no one dwelt, with the idea of crossing the boundaries of Ulphalor into one of the independent kingdoms that lay below the equator. He remembered Vizaphmal telling him once that the people of these kingdoms were more enlightened and less priest-ridden than those of Ulphalor.

All night he wandered, in a sort of daze that was at times delirium. The pain of his swollen limbs increased, and he grew feverish. The moonlit plain seemed to shift and waver before him, but was interminable as the landscape of a hashish-dream. Presently the other two moons arose, and in the overtaxed condition of his mind and nerves, he was never quite sure as to their actual number. Usually, there appeared to be more than three, and this troubled him prodigiously. He tried to resolve the problem for hours, as he staggered on, and at last a little before dawn, he became altogether delirious.

He was unable afterward to recall anything about his subsequent journey. Something impelled him to go on even when his thews were dead and his brain an utter blank: he knew nothing of the waste and terrible lands through which he roamed in the hour-long ruby-red of morn and beneath a furnace-like sun; nor did he know when he crossed the equator at sunset and

entered Omanorion, the realm of the empress Ambiala, still carrying in his hand the five-pointed weapon of one of the dead inquisitors.

It was night when Alvor awoke, but he had no means of surmising that it was not the same night in which he had fled from the Inquisition of the Cosmic Mother; and that many Satabborian days had gone by since he had fallen totally exhausted and unconscious within the boundary-line of Omanorion. The warm, rosy beams of the three moons were full in his face, but he could not know whether they were ascending or declining. Anyhow, he was lying on a very comfortable couch that was not quite so disconcertingly long and high as the one upon which he had first awakened in Ulphalor. He was in an open pavilion, and this pavilion was also a bower of multitudinous blossoms which leaned toward him with faces that were both grotesque and weirdly beautiful, from vines that had scaled the columns, or from the many curious metal pots that stood upon the floor. The air that he breathed was a medley of perfumes more exotic than frangipani; they were extravagantly sweet and spicy, but somehow he did not find them oppressive. Rather, they served to augment the deep, delightful languor of all his sensations.

As he opened his eyes and turned a little on the couch, a female Alphad, not so tall as those of Ulphalor and really quite of his own stature, came out from behind the flowerpots and addressed him. Her language was not that of the Ulphalorians, it was softer and less utterly unhuman, and though he could not understand a word, he was immediately aware of a sympathetic note or undertone which, so far, he had never heard on the lips of anyone in this world, not even Vizaphmal.

He replied in the language of Ulphalor, and found that he was understood. He and the female Alphad now carried on as much of a conversation as Alvor's linguistic abilities would permit. He learned that he

was talking to the empress Ambiala, the sole and supreme ruler of Omanorion, a quite extensive realm contiguous to Ulphalor. She told him that some of her servitors, while out hunting the wild, ferocious, half-animal fruits of the region, had found him lying unconscious near a thicket of the deadly plants that bore these fruits, and had brought him to her palace in Lompior, the chief city of Omanorion. There, while he still lay in a week-long stupor, he had been treated with medicaments that had now almost cured the painful swellings resultant from his plunge among the hair-like organisms in the Inquisition.

With genuine courtesy, the empress forbore to question the poet regarding himself, nor did she express any surprise at his anatomical peculiarities. However, her whole manner gave evidence of an eager and even fascinated interest, for she did not take her eyes away from him at any time. He was a little embarrassed by her intent scrutiny, and to cover this embarrassment, as well as to afford her the explanations due to so kind a hostess, he tried to tell her as much as he could of his own history and adventures. It was doubtful if she understood more than half of what he said, but even this half obviously lent him an increasingly portentous attraction in her eyes. All of her three orbs grew round with wonder at the tale related by this fantastic Ulysses, and whenever he stopped she would beg him to go on. The garnet and ruby and cinnabar gradations of the dawn found Alvor still talking and the empress Ambiala still listening.

In the full light of Antares, Alvor saw that his hostess was, from a Satabborian viewpoint, a really beautiful and exquisite creature. The iridescence of her coloring was very soft and subtle, her arms and legs, though of the usual number, were all voluptuously rounded, and the features of her face were capable of a wide range of expression. Her usual look, however, was one of a sad and wistful yearning. This look Alvor came to

understand, when, with a growing knowledge of her language, he learned that she too was a poet, that she had always been troubled by vague desires for the exotic and the far-off, and that she was thoroughly bored with everything in Omanorion, and especially with the male Alphads of that region, none of whom could rightfully boast of having been her lover even for a day. Alvor's biological difference from these males was evidently the secret of his initial fascination for her.

The poet's life in the palace of Ambiala, where he found that he was looked upon as a permanent guest, was from the beginning much more agreeable than his existence in Ulphalor had been. For one thing, there was Ambiala herself, who impressed him as being infinitely more intelligent than the females of Sarpoulom, and whose attitude was so thoughtful and sympathetic and admiring, in contra-distinction to the attitude of those aforesaid females. Also, the servitors of the palace and the people of Lompior, though they doubtless regarded Alvor as a quite singular sort of being, were at least more tolerant than the Ulphalorians; and he met with no manner of rudeness among them at any time. Moreover, if there were any priesthoods in Omanorion, they were not of the uncompromising type he had met north of the equator, and it would seem that nothing was to be feared from them. No one ever spoke of religion to Alvor in this ideal realm, and somehow he never actually learned whether or not Omanorion possessed any gods or goddesses. Remembering his ordeal in the Inquisition of the Cosmic Mother, he was quite willing not to broach the subject, anyway.

Alvor made rapid progress in the language of Omanorion, since the empress herself was his teacher. He soon learned more and more about her ideas and tastes, about her romantic love for the triple moonlight, and the odd flowers that she cultivated with so much care and so much delectation.

These blossoms were rare anywhere in Satabbor: some of them were anemones that came from the tops of almost inaccessible mountains many leagues in height, and others were forms inconceivably more bizarre than orchids, mainly from terrific jungles near the southern pole. He was soon privileged to hear her play on a certain musical instrument of the country, in which were combined the characters of the flute and the lute. And at last, one day, when he knew enough of the tongue to appreciate a few of its subtleties, she read to him from a scroll of vegetable vellum one of her poems, an ode to a star known as Atana by the people of Omanorion. This ode was truly exquisite, was replete with poetic fancies of a high order, and expressed a halfironic yearning, sadly conscious of its own impossibility, for the ultra-sidereal realms of Atana. Ending, she added:

‘I have always loved Atana, because it is so little and so far away.’

On questioning her, Alvor learned to his overwhelming amazement, that Atana was identical with a minute star called Arot in Ulphalor, which Vizaphmal had once pointed out to him as the sun of his own earth. This star was visible only in the rare interlunar dark, and it was considered a test of good eyesight to see it even then.

When the poet had communicated this bit of astronomical information to Ambiala, that the star Atana was his own native sun, and had also told her of his Ode to Antares, a most affecting scene occurred, for the empress encircled him with her five arms and cried out:

‘Do you not feel, as I do, that we were destined for each other?’

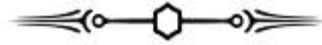
Though he was a little discomposed by Ambiala’s display of affection, Alvor could do no less than assent. The two beings, so dissimilar in external ways, were absolutely overcome by the rapport revealed in this comparing of poetic notes; and a real understanding, rare even with persons of the same evolutionary type, was established between them henceforward. Also,

Alvor soon developed a new appreciation of the outward charms of Ambiala, which, to tell the truth, had not altogether inveigled him theretofore. He reflected that after all her five arms and three legs and three eyes were merely a superabundance of anatomical features upon which human love was wont to set a by no means lowly value. As for her opalescent coloring, it was, he thought, much more lovely than the agglomeration of outlandish hues with which the human female figure had been adorned in many modernistic paintings.

When it became known in Lompior that Alvor was the lover of Ambiala, no surprise or censure was expressed by any one. Doubtless the people, especially the male Alphads who had vainly wooed the empress, thought that her tastes were queer, not to say eccentric. But anyway, no comment was made: it was her own amour after all, and no one else could carry it on for her. It would seem, from this, that the people of Omanorion had mastered the ultra-civilized art of minding their own business.

The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis

PREFACE



AS AN INTERNE in the terrestrial hospital at Ignarh, I had charge of the singular case of Rodney Severn, the one surviving member of the Octave Expedition to Yoh-Vombis, and took down the following story from his dictation. Severn had been brought to the hospital by the Martian guides of the Expedition. He was suffering from a horribly lacerated and inflamed condition of the scalp and brow, and was wildly delirious part of the time and had to be held down in his bed during reccurent seizures of a mania whose violence was doubly inexplicable in view of his extreme debility.

The lacerations, as will be learned from the story, were mainly self-inflicted. They were mingled with numerous small round wounds, easily distinguished from the knife-slashes, and arranged in regular circles, through which an unknown poison had been injected into Severn's scalp. The causation of these wounds was difficult to explain; unless one were to believe that Severn's story was true, and was no mere figment of his illness. Speaking for myself, in the light of what afterwards occurred, I feel that I have no other recourse than to believe it. There are strange things on the red planet; and I can only second the wish that was expressed by the doomed archaeologist in regard to future explorations.

The night after he finished telling me his story, while another doctor than myself was supposedly on duty, Severn managed to escape from the hospital, doubtless in one of the strange seizures at which I have hinted: a most astonishing thing, for he had seemed weaker than ever after the long

strain of his terrible narrative, and his demise had been hourly expected. More astonishing still, his bare footsteps were found in the desert, going toward Yoh-Vombis, till they vanished in the path of a light sand-storm; but no trace of Severn himself has yet been discovered.

THE NARRATIVE OF RODNEY SEVERN

If the doctors are correct in their prognostication, I have only a few Martian hours of life remaining to me. In those hours I shall endeavor to relate, as a warning to others who might follow in our footsteps, the singular and frightful happenings that terminated our researches among the ruins of Yoh-Vombis. Somehow, even in my extremity, I shall contrive to tell the story; since there is no one else to do it. But the telling will be toilsome and broken; and after I am done, the madness will recur, and several men will restrain me, lest I should leave the hospital and return across many desert leagues to those abominable vaults beneath the compulsion of the malignant and malevolent virus which is permeating my brain. Perhaps death will release me from that abhorrent control, which would urge me down to bottomless underworld warrens of terror for which the saner planets of the solar system can have no analogue. I say perhaps... for, remembering what I have seen, I am not sure that even death will end my bondage...

There were eight of us, professional archaeologists with more or less terrene and interplanetary experience, who set forth with native guides from Ignarh, the commercial metropolis of Mars, to inspect that ancient, aeon-deserted city. Allan Octave, our official leader, held his primacy by virtue of knowing more about Martian archaeology than any other Terrestrial on the planet; and others of the party, such as William Harper and Jonas Halgren, had been associated with him in many of his previous researches. I, Rodney Severn, was more of a newcomer, having spent but a few months on Mars;

and the greater part of my own ultra-terrene delvings had been confined to Venus.

I had often heard of Yoh-Vombis, in a vague and legendary sort of manner, and never at first hand. Even the ubiquitous Octave had never seen it. Builded by an extinct people whose history has been lost in the latter, decadent eras of the planet, it remains a dim and fascinating riddle whose solution has never been approached... and which, I trust, may endure forevermore unsolved by man. Certainly I hope that no one will ever follow in our steps...

Contrary to the impression we had received from Martian stories, we found that the semi-fabulous ruins lay at no great distance from Ignarh with its terrestrial colony and consulates. The nude, spongy-chested natives had spoken deterringly of vast deserts filled with ever-swirling sand-storms, through which we must pass to reach Yoh-Vombis; and in spite of our munificent offers of payment, it had been difficult to secure guides for the journey. We had provisioned ourselves amply and had prepared for all emergencies that might eventuate during a long trip. Therefore, we were pleased as well as surprised when we came to the ruins after seven hours of plodding across the flat, treeless, orange-yellow desolation to the southwest of Ignarh. On account of the lesser gravity, the journey was far less tiring than one who is unfamiliar with Martian conditions might expect. But because of the thin, Himalaya-like air, and the possible strain on our hearts, we had been careful not to hasten.

Our coming to Yoh-Vombis was sudden and spectacular. Climbing the low slope of a league-long elevation of bare and deeply eroded stone, we saw before us the shattered walls of our destination, whose highest tower was notching the small, remote sun that glared in stifled crimson through the floating haze of fine sand. For a little, we thought that the domeless,

three-angled towers and broken-down monoliths were those of some unlegended city, other than the one we sought. But the disposition of the ruins, which lay in a sort of arc for almost the entire extent of the low and gneissic elevation, together with the type of architecture, soon convinced us that we had found our goal. No other ancient city on Mars had been laid out in that manner; and the strange, many-terraced buttresses of the thick walls, like the stairways of forgotten Anakim, were peculiar to the prehistoric race that had built Yoh-Vombis. Moreover, Yoh-Vombis was the one remaining example of this architecture, aside from a few fragments in the neighborhood of Ignarh, which we had previously examined.

I have seen the hoary, sky-confronting walls of Macchu Pichu amid the desolate Andes, and the teocallis that are buried in the Mexican jungles. And I have seen the frozen, giant-built battlements of Uogam on the glacial tundras of the nightward hemisphere of Venus. But these were as things of yesteryear, bearing at least the memory or the intimation of life, compared with the awesome and lethiferous antiquity, the cycle-enduring doom of a petrified sterility, that seemed to invest Yoh-Vombis. The whole region was far from the life-giving canals beyond whose environs even the more noxious flora and fauna are seldom found; and we had seen no living thing since our departure from Ignarh. But here, in this place of eternal bareness and solitude, it seemed that life could never have been. The stark, eroded stones were things that might have been reared by the toil of the dead, to house the monstrous ghouls and demons of primal desolation.

I think we all received the same impression as we stood staring in silence while the pale, sanies-like sunset fell on the dark and megalithic ruins. I remember gasping a little, in an air that seemed to have been touched by the irrespirable chill of death; and I heard the same sharp, laborious intake of breath from others of our party.

“That place is deader than an Egyptian morgue,” observed Harper.

“Certainly it is far more ancient,” Octave assented. “According to the most reliable legends, the Yorhis, who built Yoh-Vombis, were wiped out by the present ruling race at least forty thousand years ago.”

“There’s a story, isn’t there,” said Harper, “that the last remnant of the Yorhis was destroyed by some unknown agency — something too horrible and outré to be mentioned even in a myth?”

“Of course, I’ve heard that legend,” agreed Octave. “Maybe we’ll find evidence among the ruins, to prove or disprove it. The Yorhis may have been cleaned out by some terrible epidemic, such as the Yashta pestilence, which was a kind of green mould that ate all the bones of the body, starting with the teeth and nails. But we needn’t be afraid of getting it, if there are any mummies in Yoh-Vombis — the bacteria will all be dead as their victims, after so many cycles of planetary desiccation. Anyway, there ought to be a lot for us to learn. The Aihais have always been more or less shy of the place. Few have ever visited it; and none, as far as I can find, have made a thorough examination of the ruins.”

The sun had gone down with uncanny swiftness, as if it had disappeared through some sort of prestigitation rather than the normal process of setting. We felt the instant chill of the blue-green twilight; and the ether above us was like a huge, transparent dome of sunless ice, shot with a million bleak sparklings that were the stars. We donned the coats and helmets of Martian fur, which must always be worn at night; and going on to westward of the walls, we established our camp in their lee, so that we might be sheltered a little from the *jaar*, that cruel desert wind that always blows from the east before dawn. Then, lighting the alcohol lamps that had been brought along for cooking purposes, we huddled around them while the evening meal was prepared and eaten.

Afterwards, for comfort rather than because of weariness, we retired early to our sleeping-bags; and the two Aihais, our guides, wrapped themselves in the cerement-like folds of grey *bassa*-cloth which are all the protection their leathery skins appear to require even in sub-zero temperatures.

Even in my thick, double-lined bag, I still felt the rigor of the night air; and I am sure it was this, rather than anything else, which kept me awake for a long while and rendered my eventual slumber somewhat restless and broken. Of course, the strangeness of our situation, and the weird proximity of those aeonian walls and towers may in some measure have contributed to my unrest. But at any rate, I was not troubled by even the least presentiment of alarm or danger; and I should have laughed at the idea that anything of peril could lurk in Yoh-Vombis, amid whose undreamable and stupefying antiquities the very phantoms of its dead must long since have faded into nothingness.

I remember little, however, except the feeling of interminable duration that often marks a shallow and interrupted sleep. I recall the marrow-piercing wind that moaned above us toward midnight, and the sand that stung my face like a fine hail as it passed, blowing from desert to immemorial desert; and I recall the still, inflexible stars that grew dim for awhile with that fleeing ancient dust. Then the wind went by; and I drowsed again, with starts of semi-wakefulness. At last, in one of these, I knew vaguely that the small twin moons, Phobos and Deimos, had risen and were making huge and spectral shadows with the ruins and were casting an ashen glimmer on the shrouded forms of my companions.

I must have been half-asleep; for the memory of that which I saw is doubtful as any dream. I watched beneath drooping lids the tiny moons that

had topped the domeless triangular towers; and I saw the far-flung shadows that almost touched the bodies of my fellow-archaeologists.

The whole scene was locked in a petrific stillness; and none of the sleepers stirred. Then, as my lids were about to close, I received an impression of movement in the frozen gloom; and it seemed to me that a portion of the foremost shadow had detached itself and was crawling toward Octave, who lay nearer to the ruins than we others.

Even through my heavy lethargy, I was disturbed by a warning of something unnatural and perhaps ominous. I started to sit up; and even as I moved, the shadowy object, whatever it was, drew back and became merged once more in the greater shadow. Its vanishment startled me into full wakefulness; and yet I could not be sure that I had actually seen the thing. In that brief, final glimpse, it had seemed like a roughly circular piece of cloth or leather, dark and crumpled, and twelve or fourteen inches in diameter, that ran along the ground with the doubling movement of an inch-worm, causing it to fold and unfold in a startling manner as it went.

I did not go to sleep again for nearly an hour; and if it had not been for the extreme cold, I should doubtless have gotten up to investigate and make sure whether I had really beheld an object of such bizarre nature or had merely dreamt it. I lay staring at the deep ebon shadow in which it had disappeared, while a series of fanciful wonderings followed each other in antic procession through my mind. Even then, though somewhat perturbed, I was not aware of any actual fear or intuition of possible menace. And more and more I began to convince myself that the thing was too unlikely and fantastical to have been anything but the figment of a dream. And at last I nodded off into light slumber.

The chill, demoniac sighing of the *jaar* across the jagged walls awoke me, and I saw that the faint moonlight had received the hueless accession of

early dawn. We all arose, and prepared our breakfast with fingers that grew numb in spite of the spirit-lamps. Then, shivering, we ate, while the sun leapt over the horizon like a juggler's ball. Enormous, gaunt, without gradations of shadow or luminosity, the ruins beetled before us in the thin light, like the mausolea of primordial giants, that abide from darkness-eaten aeons to confront the last dawn of an expiring orb.

My queer visual experience during the night had taken on more than ever a fantasmagoric unreality; and I gave it no more than a passing thought and did not speak of it to the others. But, even as the faint, distorted shadows of slumber often tinge one's waking hours, it may have contributed to the nameless mood in which I found myself: a mood in which I felt the unhuman alienage of our surroundings and the black, fathomless antiquity of the ruins like an almost unbearable oppression. The feeling seemed to be made of a million spectral adumbrations that oozed unseen but palpable from the great, unearthly architecture; that weighed upon me like tomb-born incubi, but were void of form and meaning such as could be comprehended by human thought. I appeared to move, not in the open air, but in the smothering gloom of sealed sepulchral vaults; to choke with a death-fraught atmosphere, with the miasmata of aeon-old corruption.

My companions were all eager to explore the ruins; and of course it was impossible for me to even mention the apparently absurd and baseless shadows of my mood. Human beings on other worlds than their own are often subject to nervous and psychic symptoms of this sort, engendered by the unfamiliar forces, the novel radiations of their environment. But, as we approached the buildings in our preliminary tour of examination, I lagged behind the others, seized by a paralyzing panic that left me unable to move or breathe for a few moments. A dark, freezing clamminess seemed to

pervade my brain and muscles and suspend their inmost working. Then it lifted; and I was free to go on and follow the others.

Strangely, as it seemed, the two Martians refused to accompany us. Stolid and taciturn, they gave no explicit reason; but evidently nothing would induce them to enter Yoh-Vombis. Whether or not they were afraid of the ruins, we were unable to determine: their enigmatic faces, with the small oblique eyes and huge, flaring nostrils, betrayed neither fear nor any other emotion intelligible to man. In reply to our questions, they merely said that no Aihai had set foot among the ruins for ages. Apparently there was some mysterious tabu in connection with the place.

For equipment in that preliminary tour, we took along only a crowbar and two picks. Our other tools, and some cartridges of high explosives, we left at our camp, to be used later if necessary, after we had surveyed the ground. One or two of us owned automatics: but these also were left behind; for it seemed absurd to imagine that any form of life would be encountered among the ruins.

Octave was visibly excited as we began our inspection, and maintained a running-fire of exclamatory comment. The rest of us were subdued and silent; and I think that my own feeling, in a measure, was shared by many of the others. It was impossible to shake off the somber awe and wonder that fell upon us from those megalithic stones.

I have no time to describe the ruins minutely, but must hasten on with my story. There is much that I could not describe anyway; for the main area of the city was destined to remain unexplored.

We went on for some distance among the triangular, terraced buildings, following the zig-zag streets that conformed to this peculiar architecture. Most of the towers were more or less dilapidated: and everywhere we saw the deep erosion wrought by cycles of blowing wind and sand, which, in

many cases, had worn into roundness the sharp angles of the mighty walls. We entered some of the towers through high, narrow doorways, but found utter emptiness within. Whatever they had contained in the way of furnishings must long ago have crumbled into dust; and the dust had been blown away by the searching desert gales. On some of the outer walls, there was evidence of carving or lettering; but all of it was so worn down and obliterated by time that we could trace only a few fragmentary outlines, of which we could make nothing.

At length we came to a wide thoroughfare, which ended in the wall of a vast terrace, several hundred yards long by perhaps forty in height, on which the central buildings were grouped like a sort of citadel or acropolis. A flight of broken steps, designed for longer limbs than those of men or even the gangling modern Martians, afforded access to the terrace, which had seemingly been hewn from the plateau itself.

Pausing, we decided to defer our investigation of the higher buildings, which, being more exposed than the others, were doubly ruinous and dilapidated, and in all likelihood would offer little for our trouble. Octave had begun to voice his disappointment over our failure to find anything in the nature of artifacts or carvings that would throw light on the history of Yoh-Vombis.

Then, a little to the right of the stairway, we perceived an entrance in the main wall, half-choked with ancient débris. Behind the heap of detritus, we found the beginning of a downward flight of steps. Darkness poured from the opening like a visible flood, noisome and musty with primordial stagnancies of decay; and we could see nothing below the first steps, which gave the appearance of being suspended over a black gulf.

Octave and myself and several others had brought along electric torches, in case we should need them in our explorations. It had occurred to us that

there might be subterranean vaults or catacombs in Yoh-Vombis, even as in the latter-day cities of Mars, which are often more extensive underground than above; and such vaults would be the likeliest place in which to look for vestiges of the Yorhi civilization.

Throwing his torch-beam into the abyss, Octave began to descend the stairs. His eager voice called us to follow.

Again, for an instant, the unknown, irrational panic froze my faculties, and I hesitated while the others pressed forward behind me. Then, as before, the terror passed; and I wondered at myself for being overcome by anything so absurd and unfounded. I followed Octave down the steps, and the others came trooping after me.

At the bottom of the high, awkward steps, we found ourselves in a long and roomy vault, like a subterranean hallway. Its floor was deep with siftings of immemorial dust; and in places there were heaps of a coarse grey powder, such as might be left by the decomposition of certain fungi that grow in the Martian catacombs, under the canals. Such fungi, at one time, might conceivably have existed in Yoh-Vombis; but, owing to the prolonged and excessive dehydration, they must have died out long ago. Nothing, surely, not even a fungus, could have lived in those arid vaults for many aeons past.

The air was singularly heavy, as if the lees of an ancient atmosphere, less tenuous than that of Mars to-day, had settled down and remained in that stagnant darkness. It was harder to breathe than the outer air: it was filled with unknown effluvia and the light dust arose before us at every step, diffusing a faintness of bygone corruption, like the dust of powdered mummies.

At the end of the vault, before a strait and lofty doorway our torches revealed an immense shallow urn or pan, supported on short cube-shaped

legs, and wrought from a dull, blackish-green material which suggested some bizarre alloy of metal and porcelain. The thing was about four feet across, with a thick rim adorned by writhing indecipherable figures, deeply etched as if by acid. In the bottom of the bowl we perceived a deposit of dark and cinder-like fragments, which gave off a slight but disagreeable pungence, like the phantom of some more powerful odor. Octave, bending over the rim began to cough and sneeze as he inhaled it.

“That stuff, whatever it was, must have been a pretty strong fumigant,” he observed, “The people of Yoh-Vombis may have used it to disinfect the vaults.”

The doorway beyond the shallow urn admitted us to a larger chamber, whose floor was comparatively free of dust. We found that the dark stone beneath our feet was marked off in multiform geometric patterns, traced with ochreous ore, amid which, as in Egyptian cartouches, hieroglyphics and highly formalized drawings were enclosed. We could make little from most of them; but the figures in many were doubtless designed to represent the Yorhis themselves. Like the Aihais, they were tall and angular, with great, bellows-like chests; and they were depicted as possessing a supplementary third arm, which issued from the bosom: a characteristic which, in vestigial form, sometimes occurs among the Aihais. The ears and nostrils, as far as we could judge, were not so huge and flaring as those of the modern Martians. All of these Yorhis were represented as being nude; but in one of the cartouches, done in a far hastier style than the others, we perceived two figures whose high, conical craniums were wrapped in what seemed to be a sort of turban, which they were about to remove or adjust. The artist seemed to have laid a peculiar emphasis on the odd gesture with which the sinuous, four-jointed fingers were plucking at these head-dresses; and the whole posture was unexplainably contorted.

From the second vault passages ramified in all directions, leading to a veritable warren of catacombs. Here, enormous pot-bellied urns of the same material as the fumigating-pan, but taller than a man's head and fitted with angular-handled stoppers, were ranged in solemn rows along the walls, leaving scant room for two of us to walk abreast. When we succeeded in removing one of the huge stoppers, we saw that the jar was filled to the rim with ashes and charred fragments of bone. Doubtless (as is still the Martian custom) the Yorhis had stored the cremated remains of whole families in single urns.

Even Octave became silent as we went on; and a sort of meditative awe seemed to replace his former excitement. We others, I think, were utterly weighed down to a man by the solid gloom of a concept-defying antiquity, into which it seemed that we were going further and further at every step.

The shadows fluttered before us like the monstrous and misshapen wings of phantom bats. There was nothing anywhere but the atom-like dust of ages, and the jars that held the ashes of a long-extinct people. But, clinging to the high roof in one of the further vaults, I saw a dark and corrugated patch of circular form, like a withered fungus. It was impossible to reach the thing: and we went on after peering at it with many futile conjectures. Oddly enough, I failed to remember at that moment the crumpled, shadowy object I had seen or dreamt the night before.

I have no idea how far we had gone, when we came to the last vault; but it seemed that we had been wandering for ages in that forgotten underworld. The air was growing fouler and more irrespirable, with a thick, sodden quality, as if from a sediment of material rottenness; and we had about decided to turn back. Then, without warning, at the end of a long, urn-lined catacomb, we found ourselves confronted by a blank wall.

Here, we came upon one of the strangest and most mystifying of our discoveries — a mummified and incredibly desiccated figure, standing erect against the wall. It was more than seven feet in height, of a brown, bituminous color, and was wholly nude except for a sort of black cowl that covered the upper head and drooped down at the sides in wrinkled folds. From the three arms, and general contour, it was plainly one of the ancient Yorhis — perhaps the sole member of this race whose body had remained intact.

We all felt an inexpressible thrill at the sheer age of this shrivelled thing, which, in the dry air of the vault, had endured through all the historic and geologic vicissitudes of the planet, to provide a visible link with lost cycles.

Then, as we peered closer with our torches, we saw why the mummy had maintained an upright position. At ankles, knees, waist, shoulders and neck it was shackled to the wall by heavy metal bands, so deeply eaten and embrowned with a sort of rust that we had failed to distinguish them at first sight in the shadow. The strange cowl on the head, when closer studied, continued to baffle us. It was covered with a fine, mould-like pile, unclean and dusty as ancient cobwebs. Something about it, I know not what, was abhorrent and revolting.

“By Jove! this is a real find!” ejaculated Octave, as he thrust his torch into the mummified face, where shadows moved like living things in the pit-deep hollows of the eyes and the huge triple nostrils and wide ears that flared upward beneath the cowl.

Still lifting the torch, he put out his free hand and touched the body very lightly. Tentative as the touch had been, the lower part of the barrel-like torso, the legs, the hands and forearms all seemed to dissolve into powder, leaving the head and upper body and arms still hanging in their metal

fetters. The progress of decay had been queerly unequal, for the remnant portions gave no sign of disintegration.

Octave cried out in dismay, and then began to cough and sneeze, as the cloud of brown powder, floating with airy lightness, enveloped him. We others all stepped back to avoid the powder. Then, above the spreading cloud, I saw an unbelievable thing. The black cowl on the mummy's head began to curl and twitch upward at the corners, it writhed with a verminous motion, it fell from the withered cranium, seeming to fold and unfold convulsively in mid-air as it fell. Then it dropped on the bare head of Octave who, in his disconcertment at the crumbling of the mummy, had remained standing close to the wall. At that instant, in a start of profound terror, I remembered the thing that had inched itself from the shadows of Yoh-Vombis in the light of the twin moons, and had drawn back like a figment of slumber at my first waking movement.

Cleaving closely as a tightened cloth, the thing enfolded Octave's hair and brow and eyes, and he shrieked wildly, with incoherent pleas for help, and tore with frantic fingers at the cowl, but failed to loosen it. Then his cries began to mount in a mad crescendo of agony, as if beneath some instrument of infernal torture; and he danced and capered blindly about the vault, eluding us with strange celerity as we all sprang forward in an effort to reach him and release him from his weird incumbrance. The whole happening was mysterious as a nightmare; but the thing that had fallen on his head was plainly some unclassified form of Martian life, which, contrary to all the known laws of science, had survived in those primordial catacombs. We must rescue him from its clutches if we could.

We tried to close in on the frenzied figure of our chief — which, in the far from roomy space between the last urns and the wall, should have been an easy matter. But, darting away, in a manner doubly incomprehensible

because of his blindfolded condition, he circled about us and ran past, to disappear among the urns toward the outer labyrinth of intersecting catacombs.

“My God! What has happened to him?” cried Harper. “The man acts as if he were possessed.”

There was obviously no time for a discussion of the enigma, and we all followed Octave as speedily as our astonishment would permit. We had lost sight of him in the darkness, and when we came to the first division of the vaults, we were doubtful as to which passage he had taken, till we heard a shrill scream, several times repeated, in a catacomb on the extreme left. There was a weird, unearthly quality in those screams, which may have been due to the long-stagnant air or the peculiar acoustics of the ramifying caverns. But somehow I could not imagine them as issuing from human lips — at least not from those of a living man. They seemed to contain a soulless, mechanical agony, as if they had been wrung from a devil-driven corpse.

Thrusting our torches before us into the lurching, fleeing shadows, we raced along between rows of mighty urns. The screaming had died away in sepulchral silence; but far off we heard the light and muffled thud of running feet. We followed in headlong pursuit; but, gasping painfully in the vitiated, miasmal air, we were soon compelled to slacken our pace without coming in sight of Octave. Very faintly, and further away than ever, like the tomb-swallowed steps of a phantom, we heard his vanishing footfalls. Then they ceased; and we heard nothing, except our own convulsive breathing, and the blood that throbbed in our temple-veins like steadily beaten drums of alarm.

We went on, dividing our party into three contingents when we came to a triple branching of the caverns. Harper and Halgren and myself took the

middle passage; and after we had gone on for an endless interval without finding any trace of Octave, and had threaded our way through recesses piled to the roof with colossal urns that must have held the ashes of a hundred generations, we came out in the huge chamber with the geometric floor-designs. Here, very shortly, we were joined by the others, who had likewise failed to locate our missing leader.

It would be useless to detail our renewed and hour-long search of the myriad vaults, many of which we had not hitherto explored. All were empty, as far as any sign of life was concerned. I remember passing once more through the vault in which I had seen the dark, rounded patch on the ceiling, and noting with a shudder that the patch was gone. It was a miracle that we did not lose ourselves in that underworld maze; but at last we came back to the final catacomb, in which we had found the shackled mummy.

We heard a measured and recurrent clangor as we neared the place — a most alarming and mystifying sound under the circumstances. It was like the hammering of ghouls on some forgotten mausoleum. When we drew nearer, the beams of our torches revealed a sight that was no less unexplainable than unexpected. A human figure, with its back toward us and the head concealed by a swollen black object that had the size and form of a sofa cushion, was standing near the remains of the mummy and was striking at the wall with a pointed metal bar. How long Octave had been there, and where he had found the bar, we could not know. But the blank wall had crumbled away beneath his furious blows, leaving on the floor a pile of cement-like fragments; and a small, narrow door, of the same ambiguous material as the cinerary urns and the fumigating-pan, had been laid bare.

Amazed, uncertain, inexpressibly bewildered, we were all incapable of action or volition at that moment. The whole business was too fantastic and

too horrifying, and it was plain that Octave had been overcome by some sort of madness. I, for one, felt the violent upsurge of sudden nausea when I had identified the loathsomely bloated thing that clung to Octave's head and drooped in obscene tumescence on his neck. I did not dare to surmise the causation of its bloating.

Before any of us could recover our faculties, Octave flung aside the metal bar and began to fumble for something in the wall. It must have been a hidden spring; though how he could have known its location or existence is beyond all legitimate conjecture. With a dull, hideous grating, the uncovered door swung inward, thick and ponderous as a mausolean slab, leaving an aperture from which the nether midnight seemed to well like a flood of aeon-buried foulness. Somehow, at that instant, our electric torches appeared to flicker and grow dim; and we all breathed a suffocating fetor, like a draft from inner worlds of immemorial putrescence.

Octave had turned toward us now, and he stood in an idle posture before the open door, like one who has finished some ordained task. I was the first of our party to throw off the paralyzing spell; and pulling out a clasp-knife — the only semblance of a weapon which I carried — I ran over to him. He moved back, but not quickly enough to evade me, when I stabbed with the four-inch blade at the black, turgescient mass that enveloped his whole upper head and hung down upon his eyes.

What the thing was, I should prefer not to imagine — if it were possible to imagine. It was formless as a great slug, with neither head nor tail nor apparent organs — an unclean, puffy, leathery thing, covered with that fine, mould-like fur of which I have spoken. The knife tore into it as if through rotten parchment, making a long gash, and the horror appeared to collapse like a broken bladder. Out of it there gushed a sickening torrent of human blood, mingled with dark, filiated masses that may have been half-dissolved

hair, and floating gelatinous lumps like molten bone, and shreds of a curdy white substance. At the same time, Octave began to stagger, and went down at full length on the floor. Disturbed by his fall, the mummy-dust rose about him in a curling cloud, beneath which he lay mortally still.

Conquering my revulsion, and choking with the dust, I bent over him and tore the flaccid, oozing horror from his head. It came with unexpected ease, as if I had removed a limp rag: but I wish to God that I had let it remain. Beneath, there was no longer a human cranium, for all had been eaten away, even to the eyebrows, and the half-devoured brain was laid bare as I lifted the cowl-like object, I dropped the unnamable thing from fingers that had grown suddenly nerveless, and it turned over as it fell, revealing on the nether side many rows of pinkish suckers, arranged in circles about a pallid disk that was covered with nerve-like filaments, suggesting a sort of plexus.

My companions had pressed forward behind me; but, for an appreciable interval, no one spoke.

“How long do you suppose he has been dead?” It was Halgren who whispered the awful question, which we had all been asking ourselves. Apparently no one felt able or willing to answer it; and we could only stare in horrible, timeless fascination at Octave.

At length I made an effort to overt my gaze; and turning at random, I saw the remnants of the shackled mummy, and noted for the first time, with mechanical, unreal horror, the half-eaten condition of the withered head. From this, my gaze was diverted to the newly opened door at one side, without perceiving for a moment what had drawn my attention. Then, startled, I beheld beneath my torch, far down beyond the door, as if in some nether pit, a seething, multitudinous, worm-like movement of crawling shadows. They seemed to boil up in the darkness; and then, over the broad

threshold of the vault, there poured the verminous vanguard of a countless army: things that were kindred to the monstrous, diabolic leech I had torn from Octave's eaten head. Some were thin and flat, like writhing, doubling disks of cloth or leather, and others were more or less poddy, and crawled with glugged slowness. What they had found to feed on in the sealed, eternal midnight I do not know; and I pray that I never shall know.

I sprang back and away from them, electrified with terror, sick with loathing, and the black army inched itself unendingly with nightmare swiftness from the unsealed abyss, like the nauseous vomit of horror-sated hells. As it poured toward us, burying Octave's body from sight in a writhing wave, I saw a stir of life from the seemingly dead thing I had cast aside, and saw the loathly struggle which it made to right itself and join the others.

But neither I nor my companions could endure to look longer. We turned and ran between the mighty rows of urns, with the slithering mass of demon leeches close upon us, and scattered in blind panic when we came to the first division of the vaults. Heedless of each other or of anything but the urgency of flight, we plunged into the ramifying passages at random. Behind me, I heard someone stumble and go down, with a curse that mounted to an insane shrieking; but I knew that if I halted and went back, it would be only to invite the same baleful doom that had overtaken the hindmost of our party.

Still clutching the electric torch and my open clasp-knife, I ran along a minor passage which, I seemed to remember, would conduct with more or less directness upon the large outer vault with the painted floor. Here I found myself alone. The others had kept to the main catacombs; and I heard faroff a muffled babel of mad cries, as if several of them had been seized by their pursuers.

It seemed that I must have been mistaken about the direction of the passage; for it turned and twisted in an unfamiliar manner, with many intersections, and I soon found that I was lost in the black labyrinth, where the dust had lain unstirred by living feet for inestimable generations. The cinerary warren had grown still once more; and I heard my own frenzied panting, loud and stertorous as that of a Titan in the dead silence.

Suddenly, as I went on, my torch disclosed a human figure coming toward me in the gloom. Before I could master my startlement, the figure had passed me with long, machine-like strides, as if returning to the inner vaults. I think it was Harper, since the height and build were about right for him: but I am not altogether sure, for the eyes and upper head were muffled by a dark, inflated cowl, and the pale lips were locked as if in a silence of tetanic torture — or death. Whoever he was, he had dropped his torch; and he was running blindfold, in utter darkness, beneath the impulsion of that unearthly vampirism, to seek the very fountain-head of the unloosed horror. I knew that he was beyond human help; and I did not even dream of trying to stop him.

Trembling violently, I resumed my flight, and was passed by two more of our party, stalking by with mechanical swiftness and sureness, and cowed with those Satanic leeches. The others must have returned by way of the main passages; for I did not meet them; and I was never to see them again.

The remainder of my flight is a blur of pandemonian terror. Once more, after thinking that I was near the outer cavern, I found myself astray, and fled through a ranged eternity of monstrous urns, in vaults that must have extended for an unknown distance beyond our explorations. It seemed that I had gone on for years; and my lungs were choking with the aeon-dead air, and my legs were ready to crumble beneath me, when I saw faroff a tiny

point of blessed daylight. I ran toward it, with all the terrors of the alien darkness crowding behind me, and accursed shadows flittering before, and saw that the vault ended in a low, ruinous entrance, littered by rubble on which there fell an arc of thin sunshine.

It was another entrance than the one by which we had penetrated this lethal underworld. I was within a dozen feet of the opening when, without sound or other intimation, something dropped upon my head from the roof above, blinding me instantly and closing upon me like a tautened net, My brow and scalp, at the same time, were shot through with a million needle-like pangs — a manifold, ever-growing agony that seemed to pierce the very bone and converge from all sides upon my inmost brain.

The terror and suffering of that moment were worse than aught which the hells of earthly madness or delirium could ever contain. I felt the foul, vampiric clutch of an atrocious death — and of more than death.

I believe that I dropped the torch; but the fingers of my right hand had still retained the open knife. Instinctively — since I was hardly capable of conscious volition — I raised the knife and slashed blindly, again and again, many times, at the thing that had fastened its deadly folds upon me. The blade must have gone through and through the clinging monstrosity, to gash my own flesh in a score of places; but I did not feel the pain of those wounds in the million-throbbing torment that possessed me.

At last I saw light, and saw that a black strip, loosened from above my eyes and dripping with my own blood, was hanging down my cheek. It writhed a little, even as it hung, and I ripped it away, and ripped the other remnants of the thing, tatter by oozing, bloody tatter, from off my brow and head. Then I staggered toward the entrance; and the wan light turned to a far, receding, dancing flame before me as I lurched and fell outside the

cavern — a flame that fled like the last star of creation above the yawning, sliding chaos and oblivion into which I descended...

I am told that my unconsciousness was of brief duration. I came to myself, with the cryptic faces of the two Martian guides bending over me. My head was full of lancinating pains, and half-remembered terrors closed upon my mind like the shadows of mustering harpies. I rolled over and looked back toward the cavern-mouth, from which the Martians, after finding me, had seemingly dragged me for some little distance. The mouth was under the terraced angle of an outer building, and within sight of our camp.

I stared at the black opening with hideous fascination, and descried a shadowy stirring in the gloom — the writhing, verminous movement of things that pressed forward from the darkness but did not emerge into the light. Doubtless they could not endure the sun, those creatures of ultramundane night and cycle-sealed corruption.

It was then that the ultimate horror, the beginning madness, came upon me. Amid my crawling revulsion, my nausea-prompted desire to flee from that seething cavern-mouth, there rose an abhorrently conflicting impulse to return; to thread my backward way through all the catacombs, as the others had done; to go down where never men save they, the inconceivably doomed and accursed, had ever gone; to seek beneath that damnable compulsion a nether world that human thought can never picture. There was a black light, a soundless calling, in the vaults of my brain: the implanted summons of the Thing, like a permeating and sorcerous poison. It lured me to the subterranean door that was walled up by the dying people of Yoh-Vombis, to immure those hellish and immortal leeches, those dark parasites that engraft their own abominable life on the half-eaten brains of the dead. It called me to the depths beyond, where dwell the noisome, necromantic

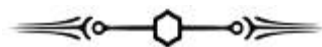
Ones, of whom the leeches, with all their powers of vampirism and diabolism, are but the merest minions...

It was only the two Aihais who prevented me from going back. I struggled, I fought them insanely as they strove to retard me with their spongy arms; but I must have been pretty thoroughly exhausted from all the superhuman adventures of the day; and I went down once more, after a little, into fathomless nothingness, from which I floated out at long intervals, to realize that I was being carried across the desert toward Ignarh.

Well, that is all my story. I have tried to tell it fully and coherently, at a cost that would be unimaginable to the sane... to tell it before the madness falls upon me again, as it will very soon — as it is doing now... Yes, I have told my story... and you have written it all out, haven't you? Now I must go back to Yoh-Vombis — back across the desert and down through all the catacombs to the vaster vaults beneath. Something is in my brain, that commands me and will direct me... I tell you, I must go...

From the Crypts of Memory

Text taken from Ebony and Crystal



AEONS OF AEONS ago, in an epoch whose marvelous worlds have crumbled, and whose mighty suns are less than shadow, I dwelt in a star whose course, decadent from the high, irremeable heavens of the past, was even then verging upon the abyss in which, said astronomers, its immemorial cycle should find a dark and disastrous close.

Ah, strange was that gulf-forgotten star — how stranger than any dreams of dreamers in the spheres of to-day, or than any vision that hath soared upon visionaries, in their retrospection of the sidereal past! There, through cycles of history whose piled and bronze-writ records were hopeless of tabulation, the dead had come to outnumber infinitely the living. And built of a stone that was indestructible save in the furnace of suns, their cities rose beside those of the living like the prodigious metropoli of Titans, with walls that overgloom the vicinal villages. And over all was the black funereal vault of the cryptic heavens—a dome of infinite shadows, where the dismal sun, suspended like a sole, enormous lamp, failed to illumine, and drawing back its fires from the face of the irresolvable a baffled and despairing beam on the vague remote horizons, and shrouded vistas illimitable of the visionary land.

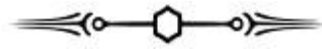
We were a sombre, secret, many-sorrowed people—we who dwelt beneath that sky of eternal twilight, pierced by the towering tombs and obelisks of the past. In our blood was the chill of the ancient night of time; and our pulses flagged with a creeping prescience of the lentor of Lethe. Over our courts and fields, like invisible sluggish vampires born of mausoleums, rose

and hovered the black hours, with wings that distilled a malefic languor made from the shadowy woe and despair of perished cycles. The very skies were fraught with oppression, and we breathed beneath them as in a sepulcher, forever sealed with all its stagnancies of corruption and slow decay, and darkness impenetrable save to the fretting worm.

Vaguely we lived, and loved as in dreams-the dim and mystic dreams that hover upon the verge of fathomless sleep. We felt for our women, with their pale and spectral beauty, the same desire that the dead may feel for the phantom lilies of Hadean meads. Our days were spent in roaming through the ruins of lone and immemorial cities, whose palaces of fretted copper, and streets that ran between lines of carven golden obelisks, lay dim and ghastly with the dead light, or were drowned forever in seas of stagnant shadow; cities whose vast and iron-built fanes preserved their gloom of primordial mystery and awe, from which the simulacra of century-forgotten gods looked forth with unalterable eyes to the hopeless heavens, and saw the ulterior night, the ultimate oblivion. Languidly we kept our gardens, whose grey lilies concealed a necromantic perfume, that had power to evoke for us the dead and spectral dreams of the past. Or, wandering through ashen fields of perennial autumn, we sought the rare and mystic immortelles, with sombre leaves and pallid petals, that bloomed beneath willows of wan and veil-like foliage: or swept with a sweet and nepenthe-laden dew by the flowing silence of Acherontic waters.

And one by one we died and were lost in the dust of accumulated time. We knew the years as a passing of shadows, and death itself as the yielding of twilight unto night.

The Shadows



THERE WERE MANY shadows in the palace of Augusthes, About the silver throne that had blackened beneath the invisible passing of ages, they fell from pillar and broken roof and fretted window in ever-shifting multiformity. Seeming the black, fantastic spectres of doom and desolation, they moved through the palace in a gradual, grave, and imperceptible dance, whose music was the change and motion of suns and moons. They were long and slender, like all other shadows, before the early light, and behind the declining sun; squat and intense beneath the desert noontide, and faint with the withered moon; and in the interlunar darkness, they were as myriad tongues hidden behind the shut and silent lips of night.

One came daily to that place of shadows and desolation, and sate upon the silver throne, watching the shadows that were of desolation. King nor slave disputed him there, in the palace whose kings and whose slaves were powerless alike in the intangible dungeon of centuries. The tombs of unnumbered and forgotten monarchs were white upon he yellow desert roundabout. Some had partly rotted away, and showed like the sunken eye-sockets of a skull-blank and lidless beneath the staring heavens; others still retained the undesecrated seal of death, and were as the closed eyes of one lately dead. But he who watched the shadows from the silver throne, heeded not these, nor the fleet wind that dipt to the broken tombs, and emerged shrilly, its unseen hands dark with the dust of kings.

He was a philosopher, from what land there was none to know or ask. Nor was there any to ask what knowledge or delight he sought in the ruined palace, with eyes always upon the moving shadows; nor what were the

thoughts that moved through his mind in ghostly unison with them. His eyes were old and sad with meditation and wisdom; and his beard was long and white upon his long white robe.

For many days he came with the dawn, and departed with sunset; and his shadow leaned from the shadow of the throne and moved with the others. But one eve he departed not; and thereafter his shadow was one with the shadow of the Silver throne. Death found and left him there, where he dwindled into dust that was as the dust of slaves or kings.

But the ebb and reflux of shadows went on, in the days that were before the end; ere the aged world, astray with the sun in strange heavens, should be lost in the cosmic darkness, or, under the influence of other and conflicting gravitations, should crumble apart and bare its granite bones to the light of strange suns, and the granite, too, should dissolve, and be as of the dust of slaves and kings. Noon was encircled with darkness, and the depths of palace-dusk were chasmed with sunlight. Change there was none, other than this, for the earth was dead, and stirred not to the tottering feet of Time. And in the expectant silence before the twilight of the sun, the moving shadows seemed but a mockery of change; a meaningless antic phantasmagoria of things that were; an afterfiguring of forgotten time.

And now the sun was darkened slowly in mid-heaven, as by some vast and invisible bulk. And twilight hushed the shadows in the palace of Augusthes, as the world itself swung down toward the long and single shadow of irretrievable oblivion.

Lost Worlds (1944)



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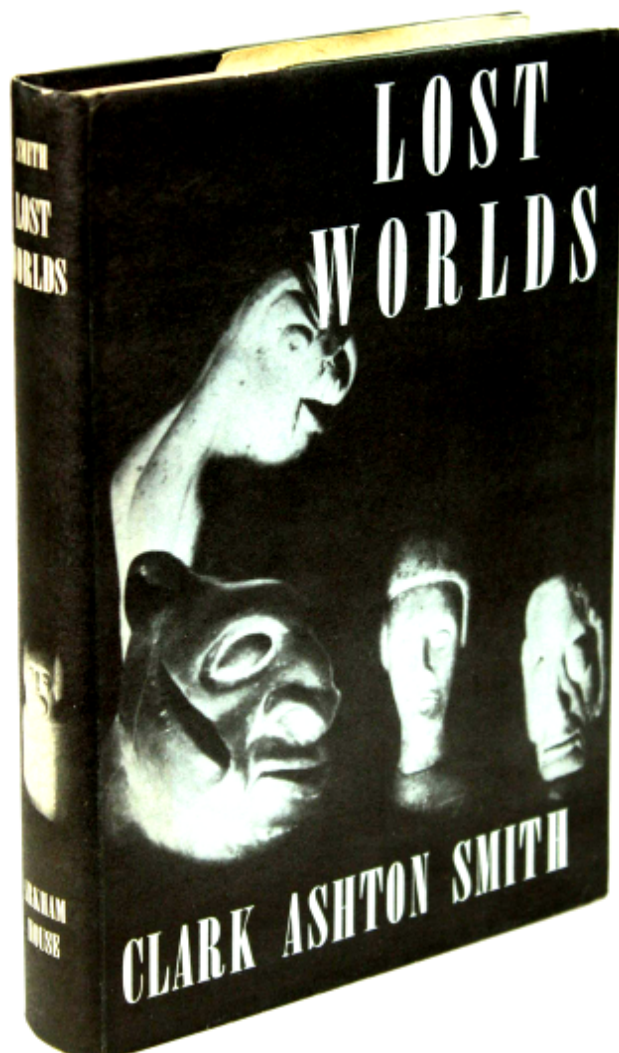
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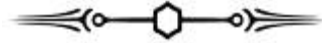
The Planet of the Dead

The Gorgon



The first edition

The Empire of the Necromancers



THE LEGEND OF Mmatmuor and Sodosma shall arise only in the latter cycles of Earth, when the glad legends of the prime have been forgotten. Before the time of its telling, many epochs shall have passed away, and the seas shall have fallen in their beds, and new continents shall have come to birth. Perhaps, in that day, it will serve to beguile for a little the black weariness of a dying race, grown hopeless of all but oblivion. I tell the tale as men shall tell it in Zothique, the last continent, beneath a dim sun and sad heavens where the stars come out in terrible brightness before eventide.

I

Mmatmuor and Sodosma were necromancers who came from the dark isle of Naat, to practise their baleful arts in Tinarath, beyond the shrunken seas. But they did not prosper in Tinarath: for death was deemed a holy thing by the people of that gray country; and the nothingness of the tomb was not lightly to be desecrated; and the raising up of the dead by necromancy was held in abomination.

So, after a short interval, Mmatmuor and Sodosma were driven forth by the anger of the inhabitants, and were compelled to flee toward Cincor, a desert of the south, which was peopled only by the bones and mummies of a race that the pestilence had slain in former time.

The land into which they went lay drear and leprous and ashen below the huge, ember-colored sun. Its crumbling rocks and deathly solitudes of sand would have struck terror to the hearts of common men; and, since they had

been thrust out in that barren place without food or sustenance, the plight of the sorcerers might well have seemed a desperate one. But, smiling secretly, with the air of conquerors who tread the approaches of a long-coveted realm, Sodosma and Mmatmuor walked steadily on into Cincor.

Unbroken before them, through fields devoid of trees and grass, and across the channels of dried-up rivers, there ran the great highway by which travelers had gone formerly between Cincor and Tinarath. Here they met no living thing; but soon they came to the skeletons of a horse and its rider, lying full in the road, and wearing still the sumptuous harness and raiment which they had worn in the flesh. And Mmatmuor and Sodosma paused before the piteous bones, on which no shred of corruption remained; and they smiled evilly at each other.

‘The steed shall be yours,’ said Mmatmuor, ‘since you are a little the elder of us two, and are thus entitled to precedence; and the rider shall serve us both and be the first to acknowledge fealty to us in Cincor.’

Then, in the ashy sand by the wayside, they drew a threefold circle; and standing together at its center, they performed the abominable rites that compel the dead to arise from tranquil nothingness and obey henceforward, in all things, the dark will of the necromancer. Afterward they sprinkled a pinch of magic powder on the nostril-holes of the man and the horse; and the white bones, creaking mournfully, rose up from where they had lain and stood in readiness to serve their masters.

So, as had been agreed between them, Sodosma mounted the skeleton steed and took up the jeweled reins, and rode in an evil mockery of Death on his pale horse; while Mmatmuor trudged on beside him, leaning lightly on an ebon staff; and the skeleton of the man, with its rich raiment flapping loosely, followed behind the two like a servitor.

After a while, in the gray waste, they found the remnant of another horse and rider, which the jackals had spared and the sun had dried to the leanness of old mummies. These also they raised up from death; and Mmatmuor bestrode the withered charger; and the two magicians rode on in state, like errant emperors, with a lich and a skeleton to attend them. Other bones and charnel remnants of men and beasts, to which they came anon, were duly resurrected in like fashion; so that they gathered to themselves an everswelling train in their progress through Cincor.

Along the way, as they neared Yethlyreom, which had been the capital, they found numerous tombs and necropoli, inviolate still after many ages, and containing swathed mummies that had scarcely withered in death. All these they raised up and called from sepulchral night to do their bidding. Some they commanded to sow and till the desert fields and hoist water from the sunken wells; others they left at diverse tasks, such as the mummies had performed in life. The century-long silence was broken by the noise and tumult of myriad activities; and the lank liches of weavers toiled at their shuttles; and the corpses of plowmen followed their furrows behind carrion oxen.

Weary with their strange journey and their oft-repeated incantations, Mmatmuor and Sodosma saw before them at last, from a desert hill, the lofty spires and fair, unbroken domes of Yethlyreom, steeped in the darkening stagnant blood of ominous sunset.

‘It is a goodly land,’ said Mmatmuor, ‘and you and I will share it between us, and hold dominion over all its dead, and be crowned as emperors on the morrow in Yethlyreom.’

‘Aye,’ replied Sodosma, ‘for there is none living to dispute us here; and those that we have summoned from the tomb shall move and breathe only at our dictation, and may not rebel against us.’

So, in the blood-red twilight that thickened with purple, they entered Yethlyreom and rode on among the lofty, lampless mansions, and installed themselves with their grisly retinue in that stately and abandoned palace, where the dynasty of Nimboth emperors had reigned for two thousand years with dominion over Cincor.

In the dusty golden halls, they lit the empty lamps of onyx by means of their cunning sorcery, and supped on royal viands, provided from past years, which they evoked in like manner. Ancient and imperial wines were poured for them in moonstone cups by the fleshless hands of their servitors; and they drank and feasted and revelled in fantasmagoric pomp, deferring till the morrow the resurrection of those who lay dead in Yethlyreom.

They rose betimes, in the dark crimson dawn, from the opulent palace-beds in which they had slept; for much remained to be done. Everywhere in that forgotten city, they went busily to and fro, working their spells on the people that had died in the last year of the pest and had lain unburied. And having accomplished this, they passed beyond Yethlyreom into that other city of high tombs and mighty mausoleums, in which lay the Nimboth emperors and the more consequential citizens and nobles of Cincor.

Here they bade their skeleton slaves to break in the sealed doors with hammers; and then, with their sinful, tyrannous incantations, they called forth the imperial mummies, even to the eldest of the dynasty, all of whom came walking stiffly, with lightless eyes, in rich swathings sewn with flame-bright jewels. And also, later, they brought forth to a semblance of life many generations of courtiers and dignitaries.

Moving in solemn pageant, with dark and haughty and hollow faces, the dead emperors and empresses of Cincor made obeisance to Mmatmuor and Sodosma, and attended them like a train of captives through all the streets of Yethlyreom. Afterward, in the immense throne-room of the palace, the

necromancers mounted the high double throne, where the rightful rulers had sat with their consorts. Amid the assembled emperors, in gorgeous and funereal state, they were invested with sovereignty by the sere hands of the mummy of Hestaiyon, earliest of the Nimboth line, who had ruled in half-mythic years. Then all the descendants of Hestaiyon, crowding the room in a great throng, acclaimed with toneless, echo-like voices the dominion of Mmatmuor and Sodosma.

Thus did the outcast necromancers find for themselves an empire and a subject people in the desolate, barren land where the men of Tinarath had driven them forth to perish. Reiging supreme over all the dead of Cincor, by virtue of their malign magic, they exercised a baleful despotism. Tribute was borne to them by fleshless porters from outlying realms; and plague-eaten corpses, and tall mummies scented with mortuary balsams, went to and fro upon their errands in Yethlyreom, or heaped before their greedy eyes, from inexhaustible vaults, the cobweb-blackened gold and dusty gems of antique time.

Dead laborers made their palace-gardens to bloom with long-perished flowers; liches and skeletons toiled for them in the mines, or reared superb, fantastic towers to the dying sun. Chamberlains and princes of old time were their cupbearers, and stringed instruments were plucked for their delight by the slim hands of empresses with golden hair that had come forth untarnished from the night of the tomb. Those that were fairest, whom the plague and the worm had not ravaged overmuch, they took for their lemans and made to serve their necrophilic lust.

II

In all things, the people of Cincor performed the actions of life at the will of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. They spoke, they moved, they ate and drank as in

life. They heard and saw and felt with a similitude of the senses that had been theirs before death; but their brains were enthralled by a dreadful necromancy. They recalled but dimly their former existence; and the state to which they had been summoned was empty and troublous and shadow-like. Their blood ran chill and sluggish, mingled with water of Lethe; and the vapors of Lethe clouded their eyes.

Dumbly they obeyed the dictates of their tyrannous lords, without rebellion or protest, but filled with a vague, illimitable weariness such as the dead must know, when having drunk of eternal sleep, they are called back once more to the bitterness of mortal being. They knew no passion or desire or delight, only the black languor of their awakening from Lethe, and a gray, ceaseless longing to return to that interrupted slumber.

Youngest and last of the Nimboth emperors was Illeiro, who had died in the first month of the plague, and had lain in his high-built mausoleum for two hundred years before the coming of the necromancers.

Raised up with his people and his fathers to attend the tyrants, Illeiro had resumed the emptiness of existence without question and had felt no surprise. He had accepted his own resurrection and that of his ancestors as one accepts the indignities and marvels of a dream. He knew that he had come back to a faded sun, to a hollow and spectral world, to an order of things in which his place was merely that of an obedient shadow. But at first he was troubled only, like the others, by a dim weariness and pale hunger for the lost oblivion.

Drugged by the magic of his overlords, weak from the age-long nullity of death, he beheld like a somnambulist the enormities to which his fathers were subjected. Yet, somehow, after many days, a feeble spark awoke in the sodden twilight of his mind.

Like something lost and irretrievable, beyond prodigious gulfs, he recalled the pomp of his reign in Yethlyreom, and the golden pride and exultation that had been his in youth. And recalling it, he felt a vague stirring of revolt, a ghostly resentment against the magicians who had haled him forth to this calamitous mockery of life. Darkly he began to grieve for his fallen state, and the mournful plight of his ancestors and his people.

Day by day, as a cup-bearer in the halls where he had ruled aforetime, Illeiro saw the doings of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. He saw their caprices of cruelty and lust, their growing drunkenness and gluttony. He watched them wallow in their necromantic luxury, and become lax with indolence, gross with indulgence. They neglected the study of their art, they forgot many of their spells. But still they ruled, mighty and formidable; and, lolling on couches of purple and rose, they planned to lead an army of the dead against Tinarath.

Dreaming of conquest, and of vaster necromancies, they grew fat and slothful as worms that have installed themselves in a charnel rich with corruption. And pace by pace with their laxness and tyranny, the fire of rebellion mounted in the shadowy heart of Illeiro, like a flame that struggles with Lethean damp. And slowly, with the waxing of his wrath, there returned to him something of the strength and firmness that had been his in life. Seeing the turpitude of the oppressors, and knowing the wrong that had been done to the helpless dead, he heard in his brain the clamor of stifled voices demanding vengeance.

Among his fathers, through the palace-halls of Yethlyreom, Illeiro moved silently at the bidding of the masters, or stood awaiting their command. He poured in their cups of onyx the amber vintages, brought by wizardry from hills beneath a younger sun; he submitted to their contumelies and insults. And night by night he watched them nod in their

drunkenness, till they fell asleep, flushed and gross, amid their arrogated splendor.

There was little speech among the living dead; and son and father, daughter and mother, lover and beloved, went to and fro without sign of recognition, making no comment on their evil lot. But at last, one midnight, when the tyrants lay in slumber, and the flames wavered in the necromantic lamps, Illeiro took counsel with Hestaiyon, his eldest ancestor, who had been famed as a great wizard in fable and was reputed to have known the secret lore of antiquity.

Hestaiyon stood apart from the others, in a corner of the shadowy hall. He was brown and withered in his crumbling mummy-cloths; and his lightless obsidian eyes appeared to gaze still upon nothingness. He seemed not to have heard the questions of Illeiro; but at length, in a dry, rustling whisper, he responded:

‘I am old, and the night of the sepulcher was long, and I have forgotten much. Yet, groping backward across the void of death, it may be that I shall retrieve something of my former wisdom; and between us we shall devise a mode of deliverance.’ And Hestaiyon searched among the shreds of memory, as one who reaches into a place where the worm has been and the hidden archives of old time have rotted in their covers; till at last he remembered, and said:

‘I recall that I was once a mighty wizard; and among other things, I knew the spells of necromancy; but employed them not, deeming their use and the raising up of the dead an abhorrent act. Also, I possessed other knowledge; and perhaps, among the remnants of that ancient lore, there is something which may serve to guide us now. For I recall a dim, dubitable prophecy, made in the primal years, at the founding of Yethlyreom and the empire of Cincor. The prophecy was, that an evil greater than death would befall the

emperors and the people of Cincor in future times; and that the first and the last of the Nimboth dynasty, conferring together, would effect a mode of release and the lifting of the doom. The evil was not named in the prophecy: but it was said that the two emperors would learn the solution of their problem by the breaking of an ancient clay image that guards the nethermost vault below the imperial palace in Yethlyreom.'

Then, having heard this prophecy from the faded lips of his forefather, Illeiro mused a while, and said:

'I remember now an afternoon in early youth, when searching idly through the unused vaults of our palace, as a boy might do, I came to the last vault and found therein a dusty, uncouth image of clay, whose form and countenance were strange to me. And, knowing not the prophecy. I turned away in disappointment, and went back as idly as I had come, to seek the moted sunlight.'

Then, stealing away from their heedless kinfolk, and carrying jeweled lamps they had taken from the hall, Hestaiyon and Illeiro went downward by subterranean stairs beneath the palace; and, threading like implacable furtive shadows the maze of nighted corridors, they came at last to the lowest crypt.

Here, in the black dust and clotted cobwebs of an immemorial past, they found, as had been decreed, the clay image, whose rude features were those of a forgotten earthly god. And Illeiro shattered the image with a fragment of stone; and he and Hestaiyon took from its hollow center a great sword of unruined steel, and a heavy key of untarnished bronze, and tablets of bright brass on which were inscribed the various things to be done, so that Cincor should be rid of the dark reign of the necromancers and the people should win back to oblivious death.

So, with the key of untarnished bronze, Illeiro unlocked, as the tablets had instructed him to do, a low and narrow door at the end of the nethermost vault, beyond the broken image; and he and Hestaiyon saw, as had been prophesied, the coiling steps of somber stone that led downward to an undiscovered abyss, where the sunken fires of earth still burned. And leaving Illeiro to ward the open door, Hestaiyon took up the sword of unruined steel in his thin hand, and went back to the hall where the necromancers slept, lying a-sprawl on their couches of rose and purple, with the wan, bloodless dead about them in patient ranks.

Upheld by the ancient prophecy and the lore of the bright tablets, Hestaiyon lifted the great sword and struck off the head of Mmatmuor and the head of Sodosma, each with a single blow. Then, as had been directed, he quartered the remains with mighty strokes. And the necromancers gave up their unclean lives, and lay supine, without movement, adding a deeper red to the rose and a brighter hue to the sad purple of their couches.

Then, to his kin, who stood silent and listless, hardly knowing their liberation, the venerable mummy of Hestaiyon spoke in sere murmurs, but authoritatively, as a king who issues commands to his children. The dead emperors and empresses stirred, like autumn leaves in a sudden wind, and a whisper passed among them and went forth from the palace, to be communicated at length, by devious ways, to all the dead of Cincor.

All that night, and during the blood-dark day that followed, by wavering torches or the light of the failing sun, an endless army of plague-eaten liches, of tattered skeletons, poured in a ghastly torrent through the streets of Yethlyreom and along the palace-hall where Hestaiyon stood guard above the slain necromancers. Unpausing, with vague, fixed eyes, they went on like driven shadows, to seek the subterranean vaults below the palace, to pass through the open door where Illeiro waited in the last vault, and then to

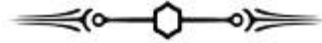
wend downward by a thousand thousand steps to the verge of that gulf in which boiled the ebbing fires of earth. There, from the verge, they flung themselves to a second death and the clean annihilation of the bottomless flames.

But, after all had gone to their release, Hestaiyon still remained, alone in the fading sunset, beside the cloven corpses of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. There, as the tablets had directed him to do, he made trial of those spells of elder necromancy which he had known in his former wisdom, and cursed the dismembered bodies with that perpetual life-in-death which Mmatmuor and Sodosma had sought to inflict upon the people of Cincor. And maledictions came from the pale lips, and the heads rolled horribly with glaring eyes, and the limbs and torsos writhed on their imperial couches amid clotted blood. Then, with no backward look, knowing that all was done as had been ordained and predicted from the first, the mummy of Hestaiyon left the necromancers to their doom, and went wearily through the nighted labyrinth of vaults to rejoin Illeiro.

So, in tranquil silence, with no further need of words, Illeiro and Hestaiyon passed through the open door of the nether vault, and Illeiro locked the door behind them with its key of untarnished bronze. And thence, by the coiling stairs, they wended their way to the verge of the sunken flames and were one with their kinfolk and their people in the last, ultimate nothingness.

But of Mmatmuor and Sodosma, men say that their quartered bodies crawl to and fro to this day in Yethlyreom, finding no peace or respite from their doom of life-in-death, and seeking vainly through the black maze of nether vaults the door that was locked by Illeiro.

The Isle of the Torturers



BETWEEN THE SUN'S departure and return, the Silver Death had fallen upon Yoros. Its advent, however, had been foretold in many prophecies, both immemorial and recent. Astrologers had said that this mysterious malady, heretofore unknown on earth, would descend from the great star, Achernar, which presided balefully over all the lands of the southern continent of Zothique; and having sealed the flesh of a myriad men with its bright, metallic pallor, the plague would still go onward in time and space, borne by the dim currents of ether to other worlds.

Dire was the Silver Death; and none knew the secret of its contagion or the cure. Swift as the desert wind, it came into Yoros from the devastated realm of Tasuun, overtaking the very messengers who ran by night to give warning of its nearness. Those who were smitten felt an icy, freezing cold, an instant rigor, as if the outermost gulf had breathed upon them. Their faces and bodies whitened strangely, gleaming with a wan luster, and became stiff as long-dead corpses, all in an interim of minutes.

In the streets of Silpon and Siloar, and in Faraad, the capital of Yoros, the plague passed like an eery, glittering light from countenance to countenance under the golden lamps; and the victims fell where they were stricken; and the deathly brightness remained upon them.

The loud, tumultuous public carnivals were stifled by its passing, and the merry-makers were frozen in frolic attitudes. In proud mansions, the wine-flushed revelers grew pale amid their garish feasts, and reclined in their opulent chairs, still holding the half-emptied cups with rigid fingers.

Merchants lay in their counting-houses on the heaped coins they had begun to reckon; and thieves, entering later, were unable to depart with their booty. Diggers died in the half completed graves they had dug for others; but no one came to dispute their possession.

There was no time to flee from the strange, inevitable scourge. Dreadfully and quickly, beneath the clear stars, it breathed upon Yoros; and few were they who awakened from slumber at dawn. Fulbra, the young king of Yoros, who had but newly succeeded to the throne, was virtually a ruler without a people.

Fulbra had spent the night of the plague's advent on a high tower of his palace above Faraad: an observatory tower, equipped with astronomical appliances. A great heaviness had lain on his heart, and his thoughts were dulled with an opiate despair; but sleep was remote from his eye-lids. He knew the many predictions that foretold the Silver Death; and moreover he had read its imminent coming in the stars, with the aid of the old astrologer and sorcerer, Vemdeez. This latter knowledge he and Vemdeez had not cared to promulgate, knowing full well that the doom of Yoros was a thing decreed from all time by infinite destiny; and that no man could evade the doom, unless it were written that he should die in another way than this.

Now Vemdeez had cast the horoscope of Fulbra; and though he found therein certain ambiguities that his science could not resolve, it was nevertheless written plainly that the king would not die in Yoros. Where he would die, and in what manner, were alike doubtful. But Vemdeez, who had served Altath the father of Fulbra, and was no less devoted to the new ruler, had wrought by means of his magical art an enchanted ring that would protect Fulbra from the Silver Death in all times and places. The ring was made of a strange, red metal, darker than ruddy gold or copper, and was set with a black and oblong gem, not known to terrestrial lapidaries, that gave

forth eternally a strong aromatic perfume. The sorcerer told Fulbra never to remove the ring from the middle finger on which he wore it — not even in lands afar from Yoros and in days after the passing of the Silver Death: for if once the plague had breathed upon Fulbra, he would bear its subtle contagion always in his flesh; and the contagion would assume its wonted virulence with the ring's removal. But Vemdeez did not tell the origin of the red metal and the dark gem, nor the price at which the protective magic had been purchased.

With a sad heart, Fulbra had accepted the ring and had worn it; and so it was that the Silver Death blew over him in the night and harmed him not. But waiting anxiously on the high tower, and watching the golden lights of Faraad rather than the white, implacable stars, he felt a light, passing chillness that belonged not to the summer air. And even as it passed the gay noises of the city ceased; and the moaning lutes faltered strangely and expired. A stillness crept on the carnival; and some of the lamps went out and were not re-lit. In the palace beneath him there was also silence; and he heard no more the laughter of his courtiers and chamberlains. And Vemdeez came not, as was his custom, to join Fulbra on the tower at midnight. So Fulbra knew himself for a realmless king; and the grief that he still felt for the noble Altath was swollen by a great sorrow for his perished people.

Hour by hour he sat motionless, too sorrowful for tears. The stars changed above him; and Achernar glared down perpetually like the bright, cruel eye of a mocking demon; and the heavy balsam of the black-jeweled ring arose to his nostrils and seemed to stifle him. And once the thought occurred to Fulbra, to cast the ring away and die as his people had died. But his despair was too heavy upon him even for this; and so, at length, the dawn came slowly in heavens pale as the Silver Death, and found him still on the tower.

In the dawn, King Fulbra rose and descended the coiled stairs of porphyry into his palace. And midway on the stairs he saw the fallen corpse of the old sorcerer Vemdeez, who had died even as he climbed to join his master. The wrinkled face of Vemdeez was like polished metal, and was whiter than his beard and hair; and his open eyes, which had been dark as sapphires, were frosted with the plague. Then, grieving greatly for the death of Vemdeez, whom he had loved, as a foster-father, the king went slowly on. And in the suites and halls below, he found the bodies of his courtiers and servants and guardsmen. And none remained alive, excepting three slaves who warded the green, brazen portals of the lower vaults, far beneath the palace.

Now Fulbra bethought him of the counsel of Vemdeez, who had urged him to flee from Yoros and to seek shelter in the southern isle of Cyntrom, which paid tribute to the kings of Yoros. And though he had no heart for this, nor for any course of action, Fulbra bade the three remaining slaves to gather food and such other supplies as were necessary for a voyage of some length, and to carry them aboard a royal barge of ebony that was moored at the palace porticoes on the river Voum.

Then, embarking with the slaves, he took the helm of the barge, and directed the slaves to unfurl the broad amber sail. And past the stately city of Faraad, whose streets were thronged with the silvery dead, they sailed on the widening jasper estuary of the Voum, and into the amaranth-colored gulf of the Indaskian Sea.

A favorable wind was behind them, blowing from the north over desolate Tasuun and Yoros, even as the Silver Death had blown in the night. And idly beside them, on the Voum, there floated seaward many vessels whose crews and captains had all died of the plague. And Faraad was still as a necropolis of old time; and nothing stirred on the estuary shores, excepting

the plummy, fanshaped palms that swayed southward in the freshening wind. And soon the green strand of Yoros receded, gathering to itself the blueness and the dreams of distance.

Creaming with a winy foam, full of strange murmurous voices and vague tales of exotic things, the halcyon sea was about the voyagers now beneath the high-lifting summer sun. But the sea's enchanted voices and its long languorous, immeasurable cradling could not soothe the sorrow of Fulbra; and in his heart a despair abided, black as the gem that was set in the red ring af Vemdeez.

Howbeit, he held the great helm of the ebon barge, and steered as straightly as he could by the sun toward Cyntrom. The amber sail was taut with the favoring wind; and the barge sped onward all that day, cleaving the amaranth waters with its dark prow that reared in the carven form of an ebony goddess. And when the night came with familiar austral stars, Fulbra was able to correct such errors as he had made in reckoning the course.

For many days they flew southward; and the sun lowered a little in its circling behind them; and new stars climbed and clustered at evening about the black goddess of the prow. And Fulbra, who had once sailed to the isle of Cymtrom in boyhood days with his father Altath, thought to see ere long the lifting of its shores of camphor and sandalwood from the winy deep. But in his heart there was no gladness; and often now he was blinded by wild tears, remembering that other voyage with Altath.

Then, suddenly and at high noon, there fell an airless cabin, and the waters became as purple glass about the barge. The sky changed to a dome of beaten copper, arching close and low; and as if by some evil wizardry, the dome darkened with untimely night, and a tempest rose like the gathered breath of mighty devils and shaped the sea into vast ridges, and abysmal valleys. The mast of ebony snapped like a reed in the wind, and the

sail was torn asunder, and the helpless vessel pitched headlong in the dark troughs and was hurled upward through veils of blinding foam to the giddy summits of the billows.

Fulbra clung to the useless helm, and the slaves, at his command, took shelter in the forward cabin. For countless hours they were borne onward at the will of the mad hurricane; and Fulbra could see naught in the lowering gloom, except the pale crests of the beetling waves; and he could tell no longer the direction of their course.

Then, in that lurid dusk, he beheld at intervals another vessel that rode the storm-driven sea, not far from the barge. He thought that the vessel was a galley such as might be used by merchants that voyaged among the southern isles, trading for incense and plumes and vermilion; but its oars were mostly broken, and the toppled mast and sail hung forward on the prow.

For a time the ships drove on together; till Fulbra saw, in a rifting of the gloom, the sharp and somber crags of an unknown shore, with sharper towers that lifted palely above them. He could not turn the helm; and the barge and its companion vessel were carried toward the looming rocks, till Fulbra thought that they would crash thereon. But, as if by some enchantment, even as it had risen, the sea fell abruptly in a windless calm; and quiet sunlight poured from a clearing sky; and the barge was left on a broad crescent of ochre-yellow sand between the crags and the lulling waters, with the galley beside it.

Dazed and marveling, Fulbra leaned on the helm, while his slaves crept timidly forth from the cabin, and men began to appear on the decks of the galley. And the king was about to hail these men, some of whom were dressed as humble sailors and others in the fashion of rich merchants. But he heard a laughter of strange voices, high and shrill and somehow evil, that

seemed to fall from above; and looking up he saw that many people were descending a sort of stairway in the cliffs that enclosed the beach.

The people drew near, thronging about the barge and the galley. They wore fantastic turbans of blood-red, and were clad in closely fitting robes of vulturine black. Their faces and hands were yellow as saffron; their small and slaty eyes were set obliquely beneath lashless lids; and their thin lips, which smiled eternally, were crooked, as the blades of scimitars.

They bore sinister and wicked-looking weapons, in the form of saw-toothed swords and doubled-headed spears. Some of them bowed low before Fulbra and addressed him obsequiously, staring upon him all the while with an unblinking gaze that he could not fathom. Their speech was no less alien than their aspect; it was full of sharp and hissing sounds; and neither the king nor his slaves could comprehend it. But Fulbra bespoke the people courteously, in the mild and mellow-flowing tongue of Yoros, and inquired the name of this land whereon the barge had been cast by the tempest.

Certain of the people seemed to understand him, for a light came in their slaty eyes at his question; and one of them answered brokenly in the language of Yoros, saying that the land was the Isle of Uccastrog. Then, with something of covert evil in his smile, this person added that all shipwrecked mariners and seafarers would receive a goodly welcome from Ildrac, the king of the Isle.

At this, the heart of Fulbra sank within him; for he had heard numerous tales of Uccastrog in bygone years; and the tales were not such as would reassure a stranded traveler. Uccastrog, which lay far to the east of Cyntrom, was commonly known as the Isle of the Torturers; and men said that all who landed upon it unaware, or were cast thither by the seas, were imprisoned by the inhabitants and were subjected later to unending curious

tortures whose infliction formed the chief delight of these cruel beings. No man, it was rumored, had ever escaped from Uccastrog; but many had lingered for years in its dungeons and hellish torture chambers, kept alive for the pleasure of King Ildrac and his followers. Also, it was believed that the Torturers were great magicians who could raise mighty storms with their enchantments, and could cause vessels to be carried far from the maritime routes, and then fling them ashore upon Uccastrog.

Seeing that the yellow people were all about the barge, and that no escape was possible, Fulbra asked them to take him at once before King Ildrac. To Ildrac he would announce his name and royal rank; and it seemed to him, in his simplicity, that one king, even though cruel-hearted, would scarcely torture another or keep him captive. Also, it might be that the inhabitants of Uccastrog had been somewhat maligned by the tales of travelers.

So Fulbra and his slaves were surrounded by certain of the throng and were led toward the palace of Ildrac, whose high, sharp towers crowned the crags beyond the beach, rising above those clustered abodes in which the island people dwelt. And while they were climbing the hewn steps in the cliff, Fulbra heard a loud outcry below and a clashing of steel against steel; and looking back, he saw that the crew of the stranded galley had drawn their swords and were fighting the islanders. But being outnumbered greatly, their resistance was borne down by the swarming Torturers; and most of them were taken alive. And Fulbra's heart misgave him sorely at this sight; and more and more he mistrusted the yellow people.

Soon he came into the presence of Ildrac, who sat on a lofty brazen chair in a vast hall of the palace. Ildrac was taller by half a head than any of his followers; and his features were like a mask of evil wrought from some pale, gilded metal; and he was clad in vestments of a strange hue, like sea-

purple brightened with fresh-flowing blood. About him were many guardsmen, armed with terrible scythe-like weapons; and the sullen, slant-eyed girls of the palace, in skirts of vermilion and breast-cups of lazuli, went to and fro among huge basaltic columns. About the hall stood numerous engineering of wood and stone and metal such as Fulbra had never beheld, and having a formidable aspect with their heavy chains, their beds of iron teeth and their cords and pulleys of fish-skin.

The young king of Yoros went forward with a royal and fearless bearing, and addressed Ildrac, who sat motionless and eyed him with a level, unwinking gaze. And Fulbra told Ildrac his name and station, and the calamity that had caused him to flee from Yoros; and he mentioned also his urgent desire to reach the Isle of Cyntrom.

‘It is a long voyage to Cyntrom,’ said Ildrac, with a subtle smile. ‘Also, it is not our custom to permit guests to depart without having fully tasted the hospitality of the Isle of Uccastrog. Therefore, King Fulbra, I must beg you to curb your impatience. We have much to show you here, and many diversions to offer. My chamberlains will now conduct you to a room befitting your royal rank. But first I must ask you to leave with me the sword that you carry at your side; for swords are often sharp — and I do not wish my guests to suffer injury by their own hands.’

So Fulbra’s sword was taken from him by one of the palace guardsmen; and a small ruby-hilted dagger that he carried was also removed. Then several of the guards, hemming him in with their scythed weapons, led him from the hall and by many corridors and downward flights of stairs into the soft rock beneath the palace. And he knew not whither his three slaves were taken, or what disposition was made of the captured crew of the galley. And soon he passed from the daylight into cavernous halls illumed by sulfur-colored flames in copper cressets; and all around him, in hidden chambers,

he heard the sound of dismal moans and loud, maniacal howlings that seemed to beat and die upon adamantine doors.

In one of these halls, Fulbra and his guardsmen met a young girl, fairer and less sullen of aspect than the others; and Fulbra thought that the girl smiled upon him compassionately as he went by; and it seemed that she murmured faintly in the language of Yoros: 'Take heart, King Fulbra, for there is one who would help you.' And her words apparently, were not heeded or understood by the guards, who knew only the harsh and hissing tongue of Uccastrog.

After descending many stairs, they came to a ponderous door of bronze; and the door was unlocked by one of the guards, and Fulbra was compelled to enter; and the door clanged dolorously behind him. The chamber into which he had been thrust was walled on three sides with the dark stone of the island, and was walled on the fourth with heavy, unbreakable glass. Beyond the glass he saw the blue-green, glimmering waters of the undersea, lit by the hanging cressets of the chamber; and in the waters were great devil-fish whose tentacles writhed along the wall; and huge pythonomorphs with fabulous golden coils receding in the gloom; and the floating corpses of men that stared in upon him with eyeballs from which the lids had been excised.

There was a couch in one corner of the dungeon, close to the wall of glass; and food and drink had been supplied for Fulbra in vessels of wood. The king laid himself down, weary and hopeless, without tasting the food. Then, lying with close-shut eyes while the dead men and sea-monsters peered in upon him by the glare of the cressets, he strove to forget his griefs and the dolorous doom that impended. And through his clouding terror and sorrow, he seemed to see the comely face of the girl who had smiled upon him compassionately, and who, alone of all that he had met in Uccastrog,

had spoken to him with words of kindness. The face returned ever and anon, with a soft haunting, a gentle sorcery; and Fulbra felt, for the first time in many suns, the dim stirring of his buried youth and the vague, obscure desire of life. So, after a while, he slept; and the face of the girl came still before him in his dreams.

The cressets burned above him with undiminished flames when he awakened; and the sea beyond the wall of glass was thronged with the same monsters as before, or with others of like kind. But amid the floating corpses he now beheld the flayed bodies of his own slaves, who, after being tortured by the island people, had been cast forth into the submarine cavern that adjoined his dungeon, so that he might see them on awakening.

He sickened with new horror at the sight; but even as he stared at the dead faces, the door of bronze swung open with a sullen grinding, and his guards entered. Seeing that he had not consumed the food and water provided for him, they forced him to eat and drink a little, menacing him with their broad, crooked blades till he complied. And then they led him from the dungeon and took him before King Ildrac, in the great hall of tortures.

Fulbra saw, by the level golden light through the palace windows and the long shadows of the columns and machines of torment, that the time was early dawn. The hall was crowded with the Torturers and their women; and many seemed to look on while others, of both sexes, busied themselves with ominous preparations. And Fulbra saw that a tall brazen statue, with cruel and demonian visage, like some implacable god of the underworld, was now standing at the right hand of Ildrac where he sat aloft on his brazen chair.

Fulbra was thrust forward by his guards, and Ildrac greeted him briefly, with a wily smile that preceded the words and lingered after them. And

when Ildrac had spoken, the brazen image also began to speak, addressing Fulbra in the language of Yoros, with strident and metallic tones, and telling him with full and minute circumstance the various infernal tortures to which he was to be subjected on that day.

When the statue had done speaking, Fulbra heard a soft whisper in his ear, and saw beside him the fair girl whom he had previously met in the nether corridors. And the girl, seemingly unheeded by the Torturers, said to him: 'Be courageous, and endure bravely all that is inflicted; for I shall effect your release before another day, if this be possible.'

Fulbra was cheered by the girl's assurance; and it seemed to him that she was fairer to look upon than before; and he thought that her eyes regarded him tenderly; and the twin desires of love and life were strangely resurrected in his heart, to fortify him against the tortures of Ildrac.

Of that which was done to Fulbra for the wicked pleasure of King Ildrac and his people, it were not well to speak fully. For the islanders of Uccastrog had designed innumerable torments, curious and subtle, wherewith to harry and excruciate the five senses; and they could harry the brain itself, driving it to extremes more terrible than madness; and could take away the dearest treasures of memory and leave unutterable foulness in their place.

On that day, however, they did not torture Fulbra to the uttermost. But they racked his ears with cacophonous sounds; with evil flutes that chilled the blood and curdled it upon his heart; with deep drums that seemed to ache in all his tissues; and thin tabors that wrenched his very bones. Then they compelled him to breathe the mounting fumes of braziers wherein the dried gall of dragons and the adipocere of dead cannibals were burned together with a fetid wood. Then, when the fire had died down, they

freshened it with the oil of vampire bats; and Fulbra swooned, unable to bear the fetor any longer.

Later, they stripped away his kingly vestments and fastened about his body a silken girdle that had been freshly dipt in an acid carrosive only to human flesh; and the acid ate slowly, fretting his skin with infinite pangs.

Then, after removing the girdle lest it slay him, the Torturers brought in certain creatures that had the shape of elllong serpents, but were covered from head to tail with sable hairs like those of a caterpillar. And these creatures twined themselves tightly about the arms and legs of Fulbra; and though he fought wildly in his revulsion, he could not loosen them with his hands; and the hairs that covered their constringent coils began to pierce his limbs like a million tiny needles, till he screamed with the agony. And when his breath failed him and he could scream no longer, the baby serpents were induced to relinquish their hold by a languorous piping of which the islanders knew the secret. They dropped away and left him; but the mark of their coils was imprinted redly about his limbs; and around his body there burned the raw branding of the girdle.

King Ildrac and his people looked on with a dreadful gloating; for in such things they took their joy, and strove to pacify an implacable obscure desire. But seeing now that Fulbra could endure no more, and wishing to wreak their will upon him for many future days, they took him back to his dungeon.

Lying sick with remembered horror, feverish with pain, he longed not for the clemency of death, but hoped for the coming of the girl to release him as she had promised. The long hours passed with a half-delirious tedium; and the cressets, whose flames had been changed to crimson, appeared to fill his eyes with flowing blood; and the dead men and the sea-monsters swam as if in blood beyond the wall of glass. And the girl came not; and Fulbra had

begun to despair. Then, at last, he heard the door open gently and not with the harsh clangor that had proclaimed the entrance of his guards.

Turning, he saw the girl, who stole swiftly to his couch with a lifted fingertip, enjoining silence. She told him with soft whispers that her plan had failed; but surely on the following night she would be able to drug the guards and obtain the keys of the outer gates; and Fulbra could escape from the palace to a hidden cove in which a boat with water and provisions lay ready for his use. She prayed him to endure for another day the torments of Ildrac; and to this, perforce, he consented. And he thought that the girl loved him; for tenderly she caressed his feverous brow, and rubbed his torture-burning limbs with a soothing ointment. He deemed that her eyes were soft with a compassion that was more than pity. So Fulbra believed the girl and trusted her, and took heart against the horror of the coming day. Her name, it seemed, was Ilvaa; and her mother was a woman of Yoros who had married one of the evil islanders, choosing this repugnant union as an alternative to the flaying-knives of Ildrac.

Too soon the girl went away, pleading the great danger of discovery, and closed the door softly upon Fulbra. And after a while the king slept; and Ilvaa returned to him amid the delirious abominations of his dreams, and sustained him against the terror of strange hells.

At dawn the guards came with their hooked weapons, and led him again before Ildrac. And again the brazen, demoniac statue, in a strident voice, announced the fearful ordeals that he was to undergo. And this time he saw that other captives, including the crew and merchants of the galley, were also awaiting the malefic ministrations of the Torturers in the vast hall.

Once more in the throng of watchers the girl Ilvaa pressed close to him, unreprimanded by his guards, and murmured words of comfort; so that Fulbra was enheartened against the enormities foretold by the brazen

oracular image. And indeed a bold and hopeful heart was required to endure the ordeals of that day...

Among other things less goodly to be mentioned, the Torturers held before Fulbra a mirror of strange wizardry, wherein his own face was reflected as if seen after death. The rigid features, as he gazed upon them, became marked with the green and bluish marbling of corruption; and the withering flesh fell in on the sharp bones, and displayed the visible fretting of the worm. Hearing meanwhile the dolorous groans and agonizing cries of his fellow captives all about the hall, he beheld other faces, dead, swollen, lidless, and flayed, that seemed to approach him from behind and to throng about his own face in the mirror. Their looks were dank and dripping, like the hair of corpses recovered from the sea; and sea-weed was mingled with the locks. Then, turning at a cold and clammy touch, he found that these faces were no illusion but the actual reflection of cadavers drawn from the under-sea by a malign sorcery, that had entered the hall of Ildrac like living men and were peering over his shoulder.

His own slaves, with flesh that the sea-things had gnawed even to the bone, were among them. And the slaves came toward him with glaring eyes that saw only the voidness of death. And beneath the sorcerous control of Ildrac, their evilly animated corpses began to assail Fulbra, clawing at his face and raiment with half-eaten fingers. And Fulbra, faint with loathing, struggled against his dead slaves, who knew not the voice of their master and were deaf as the wheels and racks of torment used by Ildrac...

Anon the drowned and dripping corpses went away; and Fulbra was stripped by the Torturers and was laid supine on the palace floor, with iron rings that bound him closely to the flags at knee and wrist, at elbow and ankle. Then they brought in the disinterred body of a woman, nearly eaten, in which a myriad maggots swarmed on the uncovered bones and tatters of

dark corruption; and this body they placed on the right hand of Fulbra. And also they fetched the carrion of a black goat that was newly touched with beginning decay; and they laid it down beside him on the left hand. Then, across Fulbra, from right to left, the hungry maggots crawled in a long and undulant wave...

After the consummation of this torture, there came many others that were equally ingenious and atrocious, and were well designed for the delectation of King Ildrac and his people. And Fulbra endured the tortures valiantly, upheld by the thought of Ilvaa.

Vainly, however, on the night that followed this day, he waited in his dungeon for the girl. The cressets burned with a bloodier crimson; and new corpses were among the flayed and floating dead in the sea-cavern; and strange double-bodied serpents of the nether deep arose with an endless squirming; and their horned heads appeared to bloat immeasurably against the crystal wall. Yet the girl Ilvaa came not to free him as she had promised; and the night passed. But though despair resumed its old dominion in the heart of Fulbra, and terror came with talons steeped in fresh venom, he refused to doubt Ilvaa, telling himself that she had been delayed or prevented by some unforeseen mishap.

At dawn of the third day, he was again taken before Ildrac. The brazen image, announcing the ordeals of the day, told him that he was to be bound on a wheel of adamant; and, lying on the wheel, was to drink a drugged wine that would steal away his royal memories for ever, and would conduct his naked soul on a long pilgrimage through monstrous and infamous hells before bringing it back to the hall of Ildrac and the broken body on the wheel.

Then certain women of the Torturers, laughing obscenely, came forward and bound King Fulbra to the adamantine wheel with thongs of dragon-gut.

And after they had done this, the girl Ilvaa, smiling with the shameless exultation of open cruelty, appeared before Fulbra and stood close beside him, holding a golden cup that contained the drugged wine. She mocked him for his folly and credulity in trusting her promises; and the other women and the male Torturers, even to Ildrac on his brazen seat, laughed loudly and evilly at Fulbra, and praised Ilvaa for the perfidy she had practised upon him.

So Fulbra's heart grew sick with a darker despair than any he had yet known. The brief, piteous love that had been born amid sorrow and agony perished within him, leaving but ashes steeped in gall. Yet, gazing at Ilvaa with sad eyes, he uttered no word of reproach. He wished to live no longer; and yearning for a swift death, he bethought him of the wizard ring of Vemdeez and of that which Vemdeez had said would follow its removal from his finger. He still wore the ring, which the Torturers had deemed a bauble of small value. But his hands were bound tightly to the wheel, and he could not remove it. So, with a bitter cunning, knowing full well that the islanders would not take away the ring if he should offer it to them, he feigned a sudden madness and cried wildly:

‘Steal my memories, if ye will, with your accursed wine and send me through a thousand hells and bring me back again to Uccastrog: but take not the ring that I wear on my middle finger; for it is more precious to me than many kingdoms or the pale breasts of love.’

Hearing this, King Ildrac rose from his brazen seat; and bidding Ilvaa to delay the administration of the wine, he came forward and inspected curiously the ring of Vemdeez, which gleamed darkly, set with its rayless gem, on Fulbra's finger. And all the while, Fulbra cried out against him in a frenzy, as if fearing that he would take the ring.

So Ildrac, deeming that he could plague the prisoner thereby and could heighten his suffering a little, did the very thing for which Fulbra had planned. And the ring came easily from the shrunken finger; and Ildrac, wishing to mock the royal captive, placed it on his own middle digit.

Then, while Ildrac regarded the captive with a more deeply graven smile of evil on the pale, gilded mask of his face, there came to King Fulbra of Yoros the dreadful and longed-for thing. The Silver Death, that had slept so long in his body beneath the magical abeyance of the ring of Vemdeez, was made manifest even as he hung on the adamantine wheel. His limbs stiffened with another rigor than that of agony; and his face shone brightly with the coming of the Death; and so he died.

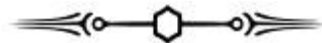
Then, to Ilvaa and to many of the Torturers who stood wondering about the wheel, the chill and instant contagion of the Silver Death was communicated. They fell even where they had stood; and the pestilence remained like a glittering light on the faces and the hands of the men and shone forth from the nude bodies of the women. And the plague passed along the immense hall; and the other captives of King Ildrac were released thereby from their various torments; and the Torturers found surcease from the dire longing that they could assuage only through the pain of their fellowmen. And through all the palace, and throughout the Isle of Uccastrog, the Death flew swiftly, visible in those upon whom it had breathed, but otherwise unseen and inpalpable.

But Ilrac, wearing the ring of Vemdeez, was immune. And guessing not the reason for his immunity, he beheld with consternation the doom that had overtaken his followers, and watched in stupefaction the freeing of his victims. Then, fearful of some inimic sorcery, he rushed from the hall; and standing in the early sun on a palace-terrace above the sea, he tore the ring of Vemdeez from his finger and hurled it to the foamy billows far below,

deeming in his terror that the ring was perhaps the source or agent of the unknown hostile magic.

So Ildrac, in his turn, when all the others had fallen, was smitten by the Silver Death; and its peace descended upon him where he lay in his robes of blood-brightened purple, with features shining palely to the unclouded sun. And oblivion claimed the Isle of Uccastrog; and the Torturers were one with the tortured.

Necromancy in Naat



Dead longing, sundered evermore from pain:

How dim and sweet the shadow-hearted love,

The happiness that perished lovers prove

In Naat, far beyond the sable main.

SONG OF THE GALLEY-SLAVES.

YADAR, PRINCE OF A NOMAD PEOPLE in the half-desert region known as Zyra, had followed throughout many kingdoms a clue that was often more elusive than broken gossamer. For thirteen moons he had sought Dalili, his betrothed, whom the slave traders of Sha-Rag, swift and cunning as desert falcons, had reft from the tribal encampment with nine other maidens while Yadar and his men were hunting the black gazelles of Zyra. Fierce was the grief of Yadar, and fiercer still his wrath, when he came back at eve to the ravaged tents. He had sworn then a great oath to find Dalili, whether in a slave-mart or brothel or harem, whether dead or living, whether tomorrow or after the lapse of gray years.

Disguised as a rug merchant, with four of his men in like attire, and guided only by the gossip of bazaars, he had gone from capital to capital of the continent Zothique. One by one his followers had died of strange fevers or the hardships of the route. After much random wandering and pursuit of vain rumors, he had come alone to Oroth, a western seaport of the land of Xylac.

There he heard a rumor that might concern Dalili; for the people of Oroth were still gossiping about the departure of a rich galley bearing a

lovely outland girl, answering to her description, who had been bought by the emperor of Xylac and sent to the ruler of the far southern kingdom of Yoros as a gift concluding a treaty between these realms.

Yadar, now hopeful of finding his beloved, took passage on a ship that was about to sail for Yoros. The ship was a small merchant galley, laden with grain and wine, that was wont to coast up and down, hugging closely the winding western shores of Zothique and venturing never beyond eyesight of land. On a clear blue summer day it departed from Oroth with all auguries for a safe and tranquil voyage. But on the third morn after leaving port, a tremendous wind blew suddenly from the low-lying shore they were then skirting; and with it, blotting the heavens and sea, there came a blackness as of night thickened with clouds; and the vessel was swept far out, going blindly with the blind tempest.

After two days the wind fell from its ravening fury and was soon no more than a vague whisper; and the skies cleared, leaving a bright azure vault from horizon to horizon. But nowhere was there any land visible, only a waste of waters that still roared and tossed turbulently without wind, pouring ever westward in a tide too swift and strong for the galley to stem. And the galley was borne on irresistibly by that strange current, even as by the hurricane.

Yadar, who was the sole passenger, marveled much at this thing; and he was struck by the pale terror on the faces of the captain and crew. And, looking again at the sea, he remarked a singular darkening of its waters, which assumed from moment to moment a hue as of old blood commingled with more and more of blackness: though above it the sun shone untarnished. So he made inquiry of the captain, a graybeard from Yoros, named Agor, who had sailed the ocean for forty summers; and the captain answered:

‘This I had apprehended when the storm bore us westward: for we have fallen into the grip of that terrible ocean-stream which mariners call the Black River. Evermore the stream surges and swiftens toward the place of the sun’s outermost setting, till it pours at last from the world’s rim. Between us now and that final verge there is no land saving the evil land of Naat, which is called also the Isle of Necromancers. I know not which were the worse fate, to be wrecked on that infamous isle or hurled into space with the waters falling from earth’s edge. From either place there is no return for living men such as we. And from the Isle of Naat none go forth except the ill sorcerers who people it, and the dead who are raised up and controlled by their sorcery. In magical ships that breast the Black River, the sorcerers sail at will to other strands; and beneath their necromancy, to fulfill their wicked errands, the dead men swim without pause for many nights and days whither-so-ever the masters may send them.’

Yadar, who knew little of sorcerers and necromancy, was somewhat incredulous concerning these matters. But he saw that the blackening waters streamed always more wildly and torrentially towards the skyline; and verily there was small hope that the galley could regain its southward course. And he was troubled chiefly by the thought that he should never reach the kingdom of Yoros, where he had dreamt to find Dalili.

All that day the vessel was borne on by the dark seas racing weirdly beneath an airless and immaculate heaven. It followed the orange sunset into a night filled with large, unquivering stars; and at length it was overtaken by the flying amber morn. But still there was no abating of the waters; and neither land nor cloud was discernible in the vastness about the galley.

Yadar held little converse with Agor and the crew, after questioning them as to the reason of the ocean’s blackness, which was a thing that no man

understood. Despair was upon him; but, standing at the bulwark, he watched the sky and wave with an alertness born of his nomad life. Toward afternoon he descried far off a strange vessel with funereal purple sails, that drove steadily on an eastering course against the mighty current. He called Agor's attention to the vessel; and Agor, with a muttering of sailors' oaths, told him that it was a ship belonging to the necromancers of Naat.

Soon the purple sails were lost to vision; but a little later, Yadar perceived certain objects resembling human heads, that passed in the high-billowing water to the galley's leeward. Deeming that no mortal living men could swim thus, and remembering that which Agor had said concerning the dead swimmers who went forth from Naat, Yadar was aware of such trepidation as a brave man may feel in the presence of things beyond nature. And he did not speak of the matter; and seemingly the head-like objects were not noticed by his companions.

Still the galley drove on, its oarsmen sitting idle at the oars, and the captain standing listless beside the untended helm.

Toward night, as the sun declined above that tumultuous ebon ocean, it seemed that a great bank of thunder-cloud arose from the west, long and low-lying at first, but surging rapidly skyward with the mountainous domes. Ever higher it loomed, revealing the menace as of piled cliffs and somber, awful sea-capes; but its form changed not in the fashion of clouds; and Yadar knew it at last for an island bulking far aloft in the long-rayed sunset. From it a shadow was thrown for leagues, darkening still more the sable waters, as if with the fall of untimely night; and in the shadow the foam-crests flashing upon hidden reefs were white as the bared teeth of death. And Yadar needed not the shrill frightened cries of his companions to tell him that this was the terrible Isle of Naat.

Direly the current swiftened, raging, as it raced onward for battle with the rock-fanged shore; and the voices of the mariners, praying loudly to their gods, were drowned by its clamor. Yadar, standing in the prow, gave only a silent prayer to the dim, fatal deity of his tribe; and his eyes searched the towering isle like those of a sea-flown hawk, seeing the bare horrific crags, and the spaces of dark forest creeping seaward between the crags, and the white mounting of monstrous breakers on a shadowy strand.

Shrouded, and ominous of bale was the island's aspect, and the heart of Yadar sank like a plummet in unsunned seas. As the galley hove nearer to land, he thought that he beheld people moving darkly, visible in the lapsing of surges on a low beach, and then hiddeed once more by foam and spindrift. Ere he saw them a second time, the galley was hurled with thunderous crashing and grinding on a reef buried beneath the torrent waters. The forepart of its prow and bottom were broken in, and being lifted from the reef by a second comber, it filled instantly and sank. Of those who had sailed from Oroth, Yadar alone leapt free ere its foundering; but, since he was little skilled as a swimmer, he was drawn under quickly and was like to have drowned in the maelstroms of that evil sea.

His senses left him, and in his brain, like a lost sun returned from yesteryear, he beheld the face of Dalili; and with Dalili, in a bright fantasmagoria, there came the happy days that had been ere his bereavement. The visions passed, and he awoke struggling, with the bitterness of the sea in his mouth, and its loudness in his ears, and its rushing darkness all about him. And, as his senses quickened, he became aware of a form that swam close behind him, and arms that supported him amid the water.

He lifted his head and saw dimly the pale neck and halfaverted face of his rescuer, and the long black hair that floated from wave to wave.

Touching the body at his side, he knew it for that of a woman. Mazed and wildered though he was by the sea's buffeting, a sense of something familiar stirred within him, and he thought that he had known somewhere, at some former time a woman with like hair and similar curving of cheek. And, trying to remember, he touched the woman again, and felt in his fingers a strange coldness from her naked body.

Miraculous was the woman's strength and skill, for she rode easily the dreadful mounting and falling of the surges. Yadar, floating as in a cradle upon her arm, beheld the nearing shore from the billows' summits; and hardly it seemed that any swimmer, however able, could win alive through the wildness of that surf. Dizzily; at the last, they were hurled upward, as if the surf would fling them against the highest crag; but, as if checked by some enchantment, the wave fell with a slow, lazy undulation; and Yadar and his rescuer, released by its ebbing, lay unhurt on a shelfy beach.

Uttering no word, nor turning to look at Yadar, the woman rose to her feet; and, beckoning him to follow, she moved away in the deathly blue dusk that had fallen upon Naat. Yadar, arising and following the woman, heard a strange and eery chanting of voices above the sea's tumult, and saw a fire that burned weirdly, with the colors of driftwood, at some distance before him in the dusk. Straightly, toward the fire and the voices, the woman walked. And Yadar, with eyes grown used to that doubtful twilight, saw that the fire blazed in the mouth of a low-sunken cleft between crags that overloomed the beach; and behind the fire, like tall, evilly posturing shadows, there stood the dark-clad figures of those who chanted.

Now memory returned to him of that which the galley's captain had said regarding the necromancers of Naat and their practises. The very sound of that chanting, albeit in an unknown tongue, seemed to suspend the heartward flowing of his veins, and to set the tomb's chillness in his

marrow. And though he was little learned in such matters, the thought came to him that the words uttered were of sorcerous import and power.

Going forward, the woman bowed low before the chanters, like a slave. The men, who were three in number, continued their incantation without pausing. Gaunt as starved herons they were, and great of stature, with a common likeness; and their sunk eyes were visible only by red sparks reflected within them from the blaze. And their eyes, as they chanted, seemed to glare afar on the darkling sea and on things hidden by dusk and distance. And Yadar, coming before them, was aware of swift horror and repugnance that made his gorge rise as if he had encountered, in a place given to death, the powerful evil ripeness of corruption.

High leaped the fire, with a writhing of tongues like blue and green serpents coiling amid serpents of yellow. And the light flickered brightly on the face and breasts of that woman who had saved Yadar from the Black River; and he, beholding her closely, knew why she had stirred within him a dim remembrance: for she was none other than his lost love, Dalili!

Forgetting the presence of the dark chanters, he sprang forward to clasp his beloved, crying out her name in an agony of rapture. But she answered him not, and responded to his embrace only with a faint trembling. And Yadar, sorely perplexed and dismayed, was aware of the deathly coldness that crept into his fingers and smote through his very raiment from her flesh. Mortally pale and languid were the lips that he kissed, and it seemed that no breath emerged between them, nor was there any rising and falling of the wan bosom against his. In the wide, beautiful eyes that she turned to him, he found only a drowsy voidness, and such recognition as a sleeper gives when but half awakened, relapsing quickly into slumber thereafter.

‘Art thou indeed Dalili?’ he said. And she answered somnolently, in a toneless, indistinct voice: ‘I am Dalili.’

To Yadar, baffled by mystery, forlorn and aching, it was as if she had spoken from a land farther away than all the weary leagues of his search for her. Fearing to understand the change that had come upon her, he said tenderly:

‘Surely thou knowest me, for I am thy lover, the Prince Yadar, who has sought thee through half the kingdoms of earth, and has sailed afar for thy sake on the unshored sea.

And she replied like one bemused by some heavy drug, as if echoing his words without true comprehension: ‘Surely I know thee.’ And to Yadar there was no comfort in her reply; and his concernment was not allayed by the parrotings with which she answered all his other loving speeches and queries.

He knew not that the three chanters had ceased their incantation; and, verily, he had forgotten their presence. But as he stood holding the girl closely, the men came toward him, and one of them clutched his arm. And the man hailed him by name and addressed him, though somewhat uncouthly, in a language spoken throughout many parts of Zothique, saying: ‘We bid thee welcome to the Isle of Naat.’

Yadar, feeling a dread suspicion, interrogated the man fiercely: ‘What manner of beings are ye? And why is Dalili here? And what have ye done to her?’

‘I am Vacharn, a necromancer,’ the man replied, ‘and these others with me are my sons, Vokal and Uldulla, who are also necromancers. We dwell in a house behind the crags, and are attended by the drowned people that our sorcery has called up from the sea. Among our servants is this girl, Dalili, together with the crew of that ship in which she sailed from Oroth. Like the vessel in which thou camest later, the ship was blown far asea and was taken by the Black River and wrecked finally on the reefs of Naat. My

sons and I, chanting that powerful formula which requires no use of circle or pentacle, summoned ashore the drowned company: even as we have now summoned the crew of that other vessel, from which thou alone wert saved alive by the dead swimmer, at our command.'

Vacharn ended, and stood peering into the dusk intently; and Yadar heard behind him a noise of slow footsteps coming upward across the shingle from the surf. Turning, he saw emerge from the livid twilight the old captain of that galley in which he had voyaged to Naat; and behind the captain were the sailors and oarsmen. With the paces of sleep-walkers they approached the firelight, the sea-water dripping heavily from their raiment and hair, and drooling from their mouths. Some were sorely bruised, and others came stumbling or dragging with limbs broken by the rocks on which the sea had flung them; and on their faces was the look of men who had suffered the doom of drowning.

Stiffly, like automatons, they made obeisance to Vacharn and his sons, acknowledging thus their thralldom to those who had called them from deep death. In their glassily staring eyes there was no recognition of Yadar, no awareness of outward things; and they spoke only in dull, rote-like recognition of certain obscure words addressed to them by the necromancers.

To Yadar, it was as if he too stood and moved like the living dead in a dark, hollow, half-conscious dream, walking beside the enchanters through a dim ravine that wound secretly toward the uplands of Naat. In his heart there was small joy at the finding of Dalili; and his love was companioned with a sick despair.

Vacharn lit the way with a brand of driftwood plucked from the fire. Anon a bloated moon rose red as with saniesmingled blood, over the wild, racing sea; and before its orb had cleared to a deathlike paleness, they

emerged from the gorge on a stony fell where stood the house of the three necromancers.

The house was built of dark granite, with long low wings that crouched amid the foliage of close-grown cypresses. Behind it a cliff beetled; and above the cliff were somber slopes and ridges piled in the moonlight rising afar toward the mountainous center of Naat.

It seemed that the mansion was a place pre-empted by death: for no lights burned in its portals and windows; and a silence came from it to meet the stillness of the wan heavens. But, when the sorcerers neared the threshold, a word was spoken by Vachara, echoing distantly in the inner halls; and as if in answer, lamps glowed suddenly everywhere, filling the house with their monstrous yellow eyes; and people appeared instantly within the portals like bowing shadows. But the faces of these beings were blanched by the tomb's pallor, and some were mottled with green decay, or marked by the tortuous gnawing of maggots...

In a great hall of the house, Yadar was bidden to seat himself at a table where Vacharn and Vokal and Uldulla commonly sat alone during their meals. The table stood on a dais of gigantic flagstones; and below, in the main hall, the dead were gathered about other tables, numbering nearly two score; and among them sat the girl Dalili, looking never toward Yadar. He would have joined her, unwilling to be parted from her side: but a deep languor was upon him, as if an unspoken spell had enthralled his limbs and he could no longer move of his own volition.

Dully he sat with his grim, taciturn hosts who, dwelling always with the silent dead, had assumed no little part of their manner. And he saw more clearly than before the common likeness of the three: for all, it seemed, were as brothers of one birth rather than parent and sons; and all were like ageless things, being neither old nor young in the fashion of ordinary men.

And more and more was he aware of that weird evil which emanated from the three, powerful and abhorrent as an exhalation of hidden death.

In the thralldom that weighed upon him, he scarcely marveled at the serving of that strange supper: though meats were brought in by no palpable agency, and wines poured out as if by the air itself; and the passing of the bearers to and fro was betrayed only by a rustle of doubtful footsteps, and a light chillness that came and went.

Mutely, with stiff gestures and movements, the dead began to eat at their tables. But the necromancers refrained from the victuals before them, in an attitude of waiting; and Vacharn said to the nomad: 'There are others who will sup with us tonight.' And Yadar then perceived that a vacant chair had been set beside the chair of Vacharn.

Anon, from an inner doorway, there entered with hasty strides a man of great thews and stature, naked, and brown almost to blackness. Savage of aspect was the man, and his eyes were dilated as with rage or terror, and his thick purple lips were flecked with foam. And behind him, lifting in menace their heavy, rusted scimitars, there came two of the dead seamen, like guards who attend a prisoner.

'This man is a cannibal,' said Vacharn. 'Our servants have captured him in the forest beyond the mountains, which is peopled by such savages.' He added: 'Only the strong and courageous are summoned living to this mansion... Not idly, O Prince Yadar, wert thou chosen for such honor. Observe closely all that follows.'

The savage had paused within the threshold, as if fearing the hall's occupants more than the weapons of his guards. One of the liches slashed his left shoulder with the rusty blade, and blood rilled from a deep wound as the cannibal came forward beneath that prompting. Convulsively he trembled, like a frightened animal, looking wildly to either side for an

avenue of escape; and only after a second prompting did he mount the dais and approach the necromancers' table. But, after certain hollow-sounding words had been uttered by Vacharn, the man seated himself, still trembling, in the chair beside the master, opposite to Yadar. And behind him, with high-raised weapons, there stationed themselves the ghastly guards, whose features were those of men a fortnight dead.

'There is still another guest,' said Vacharn. 'He will come later; and we need not wait for him.'

Without further ceremony he began to eat, and Yadar, though with little appetite, followed suit. Hardly did the prince perceive the savor of those viands with which his plate was piled; nor could he have sworn whether the vintages he drunk were sour or dulcet. His thoughts were divided between Dalili and the strangeness and horror about him.

As he ate and drank, his senses were sharpened weirdly, and he grew aware of eldritch shadows moving between the lamps, and heard the chill sibilance of whispers that checked his very blood. And there came to him, from the peopled hall, every odor that is exhaled by mortality between the recentness of death and the end of corruption. Vacharn and his sons addressed themselves to the meal with the unconcern of those long used to such surroundings. But the canibal, whose fear was still palpable, refused to touch the food before him. Blood, in two heavy rills, ran unceasingly down his bosom from his wounded shoulders, and dripped audibly on the stone flags.

Finally, at the urging of Vacharn, who spoke in the cannibal's own tongue, he was persuaded to drink from a cup of wine. This wine was not the same that had been served to the rest of the company, being of a violet color, dark as the nightshade's blossom, while the other wine was a poppy red. Hardly had the man tasted it when he sank back in his chair with the

appearance of one smitten helpless by palsy. The cup, rilling the remnant of its contents, was still clutched in his rigid fingers; there was no movement, no trembling of his limbs; and his eyes were wide open and staring as if consciousness still remained within him.

A dire suspicion sprang up in Yadar, and no longer could he eat the food and drink the wine of the necromancers. And he was puzzled by the actions of his hosts who, abstaining likewise, turned in the chairs and peered steadily at a portion of the door behind Vacharn, between the table and the hall's inner end. Yadar, rising a little in his seat, looked down across the table, and perceived a small hole in one of the flagstones. The hole was such as might be inhabited by a small animal: but Yadar could not surmise the nature of a beast that burrowed in solid granite.

In a loud clear voice, Vacharn spoke the single word, 'Esrit,' as if calling the name of one that he wished to summon. Not long thereafter, two little sparks of fire appeared in the darkness of the hole, and from it sprang a creature having somewhat the size and form of a weasel, but even longer and thinner. The creature's fur was a rusted black, and its paws were like tiny hairless hands; and its beaded eyes of flaming yellow seemed to hold the malign wisdom and malevolence of a demon. Swiftly, with writhing movements that gave it the air of a furred serpent, it ran forward beneath the chair occupied by the cannibal, and began to drink greedily the pool of blood that had dripped down on the floor from his wounds.

Then, while horror fastened upon the heart of Yadar, it leapt to the cannibal's knees, and thence to his left shoulder, where the deepest wound had been inflicted. There the thing applied itself to the still bleeding cut from which it sucked in the fashion of a weasel; the blood ceased to flow down on the man's body. And the man stirred not in his chair; but his eyes still widened, slowly, with a horrible glaring, till the balls were isled in livid

white; and his lips fell slackly apart, showing teeth that were strong and pointed, as those of a shark.

The necromancers had resumed their eating, with eyes attentive on the small bloodthirsty monster; and it came to Yadar that this was the other guest expected by Vacharn. Whether the thing was an actual weasel, or a sorcerer's familiar, he did not know; but anger followed upon his horror before the plight of the cannibal; and drawing a sword he had carried through all his travels, he sprang to his feet and would have tried to kill the monster. But Vacharn described in the air a peculiar sign with his forefinger; and the prince's arm was suspended in mid-stroke, and his fingers became weak as those of a babe, and the sword fell from his hand, ringing loudly on the dais. Thereafter, as if by the unspoken will of Vacharn, he was constrained to seat himself again at the table.

Insatiable, it seemed, was the thirst of the weasel-like creature: for, after many minutes had gone by, it continued to suck the blood of the savage. From moment to moment the man's mighty thews became strangely shrunken, and the bones and taut sinews showed starkly beneath wrinkling folds of skin. His face was like the chapless face of death, his limbs were lean as those of an old mummy: but the thing that battenened upon him had increased in size only so much as a stoat increases by sucking the blood of some farmyard fowl.

By this token, Yadar knew that the thing was indeed a demon and was no doubt, the familiar of Vacharn. Entranced with terror, he sat regarding it, till the creature dropped from the dry bones and skin of the cannibal, and ran with an evil writhing and slithering to its hole in the flagstone.

Weird was the life that now began for Yadar in the house of the necromancers. Upon him there rested always the malign thralldom that had over-powered him during that first supper; and he moved as one who could

not wholly awake from some benumbing dream. It seemed that his volition was in some way controlled by those masters of the living dead. But, more than this, he was held by the old enchantment of his love for Dalili: though the love had now turned to a spell of despair.

Something he learned of the necromancers and their mode of existence: though Vacharn spoke seldom except with grim ironies; and the sons of Vacharn were taciturn as the dead. He learned that the weasel-like familiar, whose name was Esrit, had undertaken to serve Vacharn for a given term, receiving in guerdon, at the full of each moon, the blood of a living man chosen for redoubtable strength and valor. And it was clear to Yadar that, in default of some miracle, or sorcery beyond that of the necromancers, his days of life were limited by the moon's period. For, other than himself and the masters, there was no person in all that mansion who had not already passed through the bitter gates of death...

Lonely was the house, standing far apart from all neighbors. Other necromancers dwelt on the shores of Naat; but betwixt these and the hosts of Yadar there was little intercourse. And beyond the wild mountains that divided the isle, there dwelt only certain tribes of anthropophagi, who warred with each other in the black woods of pine and cypress.

The dead were housed in deep catacomb-like caves behind the mansion, lying all night in stone coffins, and coming forth in daily resurrection to do the tasks ordained by the masters. Some tilled the rocky gardens on a slope sheltered from sea-wind; others tended the sable goats and cattle; and still others were sent out as divers for pearls in the sea that ravened prodigiously, not to be dared by living swimmers, on the bleak atolls and headlands horned with granite. Of such pearls, Vacharn had amassed a mighty store through years exceeding the common span of life. And sometimes, in a ship that sailed contrary to the Black River, he or one of his sons would voyage

to Zothique with certain of the dead for crew, and would trade the pearls for such things as their magic was unable to raise up in Naat.

Strange it was to Yadar, to see the companions of his voyage passing to and fro with the other liches, greeting him only in mindless echo of his own salutations, And bitter it was, yet never without a dim sorrowful sweetness, to behold Dalili and speak with her, trying vainly to revive the lost ardent love in a heart that had gone fathom-deep into oblivion and had not returned therefrom. And always, with a desolate yearning, he seemed to grope toward her across a gulf more terrible than the stemless tide that poured for ever about the Isle of the Necromancers.

Dalili, who had swum from childhood in the sunken lakes of Zyra, was among those enforced to dive for pearls. Often Yadar would accompany her to the shore and await her return from the mad surges; and at whiles he was tempted to fling himself after her and find, if such were possible, the peace of very death. This he would surely have done, but amid the eery wilderments of his plight, and the gray webs of sorcery woven about it, it seemed that his old strength and resolution were wholly lacking.

One day, toward sunset-time, as the month drew to its end, Vokal and Uldulla approached the prince where he stood waiting on a rock-walled beach while Dalili dived far out in the torrent waters. Speaking no word, they beckoned to him with furtive signs; and Yadar, vaguely curious as to their intent, suffered them to lead him from the beach and by perilous paths that wound from crag to crag above the curving sea-shore. Ere the fall of darkness, they came to a small landlocked harbor whose existence had been heretofore unsuspected by the nomad. In that placid bay, beneath the deep umbrage of the isle, there rode a galley with somber purple sails, resembling the ship that Yadar had discerned moving steadily toward Zothique against the full tide of the Black River.

Yadar was much bewildered, nor could he divine why they had brought him to the hidden harbor, nor the import of their gestures as they pointed out the strange vessel. Then, in a hushed and covert whisper, as if fearing to be overheard in that remote place, Vokal said to him:

‘If thou wilt aid my brother and me in the execution of a certain plan, thou shalt have the use of yonder galley in quitting Naat. And with thee, if such be thy desire, thou shalt take the girl Dalili, together with certain of the dead mariners for oarsmen. Favored by the powerful gales which our enchantments will evoke for thee, thou shalt sail against the Black River and return to Zothique... But if thou helpest us not, then shall the weasel Esrit suck thy blood, till the last member of thy body has been emptied thereof; and Dalili shall remain as the bond-slave of Vacharn, toiling for his avarice by day in the dark waters ... and perchance serving his lust by night.’

At the promise of Vokal, Yadar felt something of hope and manhood revive within him, and it seemed that the baleful sorcery of Vacharn was lifted from his mind; and an indignation against Vacharn was awakened by Vokal’s hintings. And he said quickly: ‘I will aid thee in thy plan, whatever it may be, if such aid is within my power to give.’

Then, with many fearful glances about and behind him, Uldulla took up the furtive whispering.

‘It is our thought that Vacharn has lived beyond the allotted term, and has imposed his authority upon us too long. We, his sons, grow old: and we deem it no more than rightful that we should inherit the stored treasures and the magical supremacy of our father ere age has debarred us from their enjoyment. Therefore we seek thy help in the slaying of Vacharn.’

It came to Yadar, after brief reflection, that the killing of the necromancer should be held in all ways a righteous deed, and one to which he could lend

himself without demeaning his valor or his manhood. So he said without demur: 'I will help thee in this thing.'

Seeming greatly emboldened by Yadar's consent, Vokal spoke again in his turn, saying: 'This thing must be accomplished ere tomorrow's eve, which will bring a full-rounded moon from the Black River upon Naat, and will call the weasel-demon Esrit from his burrow. And tomorrow's forenoon is the only time when we can take Vacharn unaware in his chamber. During those hours, as is his wont, he will peer entranced on a magic mirror that yields visions of the outer sea, and the ships sailing over the sea, and the lands lying beyond. And we must slay him before the mirror, striking swiftly and surely ere he awakens from his trance.'

At the hour set for the deed. Vokal and Uldulla came to Yadar where he stood awaiting them in the outer hall. Each of the brothers bore in his right hand a long and coldly glittering scimitar; and Vokal also carried in his left a like weapon, which he offered to the prince, explaining that these scimitars had been tempered to a muttering of lethal runes, and inscribed afterward with unspeakable deathspells. Yadar, preferring his own sword, declined the wizard weapon; and, delaying no more, the three went hastily and with all possible stealth toward Vacharn's chamber.

The house was empty, for the dead had all gone forth to their labors; nor was there any whisper or shadow of those invisible beings, whether sprites of the air or mere phantoms, that waited upon Vacharn and served him in sundry ways. Silently the three came to the portals of the chamber, where entrance was barred only by a black arras wrought with the signs of night in silver, and bordered with a repetition of the five names of the archfiend Thasaidon in scarlet thread. The brothers paused, as if fearing to lift the arras; but Yadar, unhesitating, held it aside and passed into the chamber; and the twain followed him quickly as if for shame of their poltroonery.

The room was large, high-vaulted, and lit by a dim window looking forth between unpruned cypresses toward the black sea. No flames arose from the myriad lamps to assist that baffled daylight; and shadows brimmed the place like a spectral fluid, through which the vessels of wizardry, the great censers and alembics and braziers, seemed to quiver like animate things. A little past the room's center, his back to the doorway, Vacharn sat on an ebon trivet before the mirror of clairvoyance, which was wrought from electrum in the form of a huge delta; and was held obliquely aloft by a serpentine copper arm. The mirror flamed brightly in the shadow, as if lit by some splendor of unknown source; and the intruders were dazzled by glimpsing of its radiance as they went forward.

It seemed that Vacharn had indeed been overcome by the wonted trance, for he peered rigidly into the mirror, immobile as a seated mummy. The brothers held back, while Yadar, thinking them close behind him, stole toward the necromancer with lifted blade. As he drew nearer, he perceived that Vacharn held a great scimitar across his knees; and, deeming that the sorcerer was perhaps forewarned, Yadar ran quickly up behind him and aimed a powerful stroke at his neck. But, even while he aimed, his eyes were blinded by the strange brightness of the mirror, as though a sun had blazed into them from its depth across the shoulder of Vacharn; and the blade swerved and bit slantingly into the collar-bone, so that the necromancer, though sorely wounded, was saved from decapitation.

Now it seemed likely that Vacharn had foreknown the attempt to slay him, and had thought to do battle with his assailers when they came. But, sitting at the mirror in pretended trance, he had no doubt been overpowered against his will by the weird brilliance, and had fallen into a mantic slumber.

Fierce and swift as a wounded tiger, he leapt from the trivet, swinging his scimitar aloft as he turned upon Yadar. The prince, still blinded, could neither strike again nor avoid the stroke of Vacharn; and the scimitar clove deeply into his right shoulder, and he fell mortally wounded and lay with his head upheld a little against the base of the snakish copper arm that supported the mirror.

Lying there, with his life ebbing slowly, he beheld how Vokal sprang forward as with the desperation of one who sees imminent death, and hewed mightily into the neck of Vacharn. The head, almost sundered from the body, toppled and hung by a strip of flesh and skin: yet Vacharn, reeling, did not fall or die at once, as any mortal man should have done: but, still animated by the wizard power within him, he ran about the chamber, striking great blows at the parricides. Blood gushed from his neck like a fountain as he ran; and his head swung to and fro like a monstrous pendulum on his breast. And all his blows went wild because he could no longer see to direct them, and his sons avoided him agilely, hewing into him oftentimes as he went past. And sometimes he stumbled over the fallen Yadar, or struck the mirror of electrum with his sword, making it ring like a deep bell. And sometimes the battle passed beyond sight of the dying prince, toward the window that looked seaward; and he heard the strange crashings, as if some of the magic furniture were shattered by the strokes of the warlock; and there were loud breathings from the sons of Vacharn, and the dull sound of blows that went home as they still pursued their father. And anon the fight returned before Yadar, and he watched it with dimming eyes.

Dire beyond telling was that combat, and Vokal and Uldulla panted like spent runners ere the end. But, after a while, the power seemed to fail in Vacharn with the draining of his life-blood. He staggered from side to side

as he ran and his paces halted, and his blows became enfeebled. His raiment hung upon him in blood-soaked rags from the slashings of his sons, and certain of his members were half Sundered, and his whole body was hacked and overscored like an executioner's block. At last, with a dexterous blow, Vokal severed the thin strip by which the head still depended; and the head dropped and rolled with many reboundings about the floor.

Then, with a wild tottering, as if still fain to stand erect, the body of Vacharn toppled down and lay thrashing like a great, headless fowl, heaving itself up and dropping back again, incessantly. Never, with all its rearings, did the body quite regain its feet: but the scimitar was still held firmly in the right hand, and the corpse laid blindly about it, striking from the floor with sidelong slashes, or slicing down as it rose half-way to a standing posture. And the head still rolled, unresting, about the chamber, and maledictions came from its mouth in a pipy voice no louder than that of a child.

At this, Yadar saw that Vokal and Uldulla drew back, as if somewhat aghast; and they turned toward the door, manifestly intending to quit the room. But before Vokal, going first had lifted the portal-arras, there slithered beneath its folds the long, black, snakish body of the weaselfamiliar, Esrit. And the familiar launched itself in air, reaching at one bound the throat of Vokal; and it clung there with teeth fastened to his flesh, sucking his blood steadily, while he staggered about the room and strove in vain to tear it away with maddened fingers.

Uldulla, it seemed, would have made some attempt to kill the creature, for he cried out, adjuring Vokal to stand firm, and raised his sword as if waiting for a chance to strike at Esrit. But Vokal seemed to hear him not, or was too frenzied to obey his adjuration. And at that instant the head of Vachara, in its rolling, bounded against Uldulla's feet; and the head, snarling ferociously, caught the hem of his robe with its teeth and hung

there as he sprang back in panic fright. And though he sliced wildly at the head with his scimitar, the teeth refused to relinquish their hold. So he dropped his garment, and leaving it there with the still pendant head of his father, he fled naked from the room. And even as Uldulla fled, the life departed from Yadar, and he saw and heard no more...

Dimly, from the depths of oblivion, Yadar beheld the flaring of remote lights, and heard the chanting of a far voice. It seemed that he swam upward from black seas toward the voice and the lights, and he saw as if through a thin, watery film the face of Uldulla standing above him, and the fuming of strange vessels in the chamber of Vacharn. And it seemed that Uldulla said to him: 'Arise from death, and be obedient in all things to me the master.'

So, in answer to the unholy rites and incantations of necromancy, Yadar arose to such life as was possible for a resurrected lich. And he walked again, with the black gore of his wound in a great clot on his shoulder and breast, and made reply to Uldulla in the fashion of the living dead. Vaguely, and as matters of no import, he remembered something of his death and the circumstances preceding it; and vainly, with filmed eyes, in the wrecked chamber, he looked for the sundered head and body of Vacharn, and for Vokal and the weasel-demon.

Then it seemed that Uldulla said to him: "Follow me," and he went forth with the necromancer into the light of the red, swollen moon that had soared from the Black River upon Naat. There, on the fell before the house, was a vast heap of ashes where coals glowed and glared like living eyes. Uldulla stood in contemplation before the heap; and Yadar stood beside him, knowing not that he gazed on the burnt-out pyre of Vacharn and Vokal, which the dead slaves had built and fired at Uldulla's direction.

Then, with shrill, eery wailings, a wind came suddenly from the sea, and lifting all the ashes and sparks in a great, swirling cloud, it swept them upon

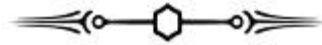
Yadar and the necromancer. The twain could hardly stand against that wind, and their hair and beards and garments were filled with the leavings of the pyre, and both were blinded thereby. Then the wind went up, sweeping the cloud of ashes over the mansion and into its doorways and windows; and through all its apartments. And for many days thereafter, little swirls of ash rose up under the feet of those who passed along the halls; and though there was a daily plying of besoms by the dead at Uldulla's injunction, it seemed that the place was never again wholly clean of those ashes...

Regarding Uldulla, there remains little enough to be told: for his lordship over the dead was a brief thing. Abiding always alone, except for those liches who attended him, he became possessed by a weird melancholy that turned quickly toward madness. No longer could he conceive the aims and objects of life; and the languor of death rose up around him like a black, stealthy sea, full of soft murmurs and shadow-like arms that were fain to draw him downward. Soon he came to envy the dead, and to deem their lot desirable above any other. So carrying that scimitar he had used at the slaying of Vacharn, he went into his father's chamber, which he had not entered since the raising up of Prince Yadar. There, beside the sun-bright mirror of divinations, he disembowled himself, and fell amid the dust and the cobwebs that had gathered heavily over all. And, since there was no other necromancer to bring him back even to a semblance of life, he lay rotting and undisturbed for ever after.

But in the gardens of Vacharn the dead people still labored, heedless of Uldulla's passing; and they still kept the goats and cattle, and dived for pearls in the dark, torrent And Yadar, being with Dalili in that state now common to them both, was drawn to her with a ghostly yearning; and he felt a ghostly comfort in her nearness. The quick despair that had racked him aforetime, and the long torments of desire and separation, were as

things faced and forgot; and he shared with Dalili a shadowy love and a dim contentment.

Xeethra



Subtle and manifold are the nets of the Demon, who followeth his chosen from birth to death and from death to death, throughout many lives.

— THE TESTAMENTS OF CARNAMAGOS

LONG HAD THE WASTING summer pastured its suns, like fiery red stallions, on the dun hills that crouched before the Mykrasian Mountains in wild easternmost Cincor. The peak-fed torrents were become tenuous threads or far-sundered, fallen pools; the granite boulder were shaled by the heat; the bare earth was cracked and creviced; and the low, meager grasses were seared even to the roots.

So it occurred that the boy Xeethra, tending the black and piebald goats of his uncle Pornos, was obliged to follow his charges further each day on the combes and hilltops. In an afternoon of late summer he came to a deep, craggy valley which he had never before visited. Here a cool and shadowy tarn was watered by hidden well-springs; and the ledgy slopes about the tarn were mantled with herbage and bushes that had not wholly lost their vernal greenness.

Surprised and enchanted, the young goatherd followed his capering flock into this sheltered paradise. There was small likelihood that the goats of Pornos would stray afield from such goodly pasturage; so Xeethra did not trouble himself to watch them any longer. Entranced by his surroundings, he began to explore the valley, after quenching his thirst at the clear waters that sparkled like golden wine.

To him, the place seemed a veritable garden-pleasance. Forgetting the distance he had already come, and the wrath of Pornos if the flock should return late for the milking, he wandered deeper among the winding crags that protected the valley. On every hand the rocks grew sterner and wilder; the valley straitened; and he stood presently at its end, where a rugged wall forbade further progress.

Feeling a vague disappointment, he was about to turn and retrace his wanderings. Then, in the base of the sheer wall, he perceived the mysterious yawning of a cavern. It seemed that the rock must have opened only a little while before his coming: for the lines of cleavage were clearly marked, and the cracks made in the surrounding surface were unclaimed by the moss that grew plentifully elsewhere. From the cavern's creviced lip there sprang a stunted tree, with its newly broken roots hanging in air; and the stubborn tap-root was in the rock at Xeethra's feet, where, it was plain, the tree had formerly stood.

Wondering and curious, the boy peered into the inviting gloom of the cavern, from which, unaccountably, a soft balmy air now began to blow. There were strange odors in the air, suggesting the pungency of temple incense, the languor and luxury of opiate blossoms. They disturbed the senses of Xeethra; and, at the same time, they seduced him with their promise of unbidden marvellous things. Hesitating, he tried to remember certain legends that Pornos had once told him: legends that concerned such hidden caverns as the one on which he had stumbled. But it seemed that the tales had faded now from his mind, leaving only a dim sense of things that were perilous, forbidden and magical. He thought that the cavern was the portal of some undiscovered world — and the portal had opened to permit his entrance. Being of a nature both venturesome and visionary, he was undeterred by the fears that others might have felt in his place.

Overpowered by a great curiosity, he soon entered the cave, carrying for a torch a dry, resinous bough that had fallen from the tree in the cliff.

Beyond the mouth he was swallowed by a rough-arched passage that pitched downward like the gorge of some monstrous dragon. The torch's flame blew back, flaring and smoking in the warm aromatic wind that strengthened from unknown depths. The cave steepened perilously; but Xeethra continued his exploration, climbing down by the stair-like coigns and projections of the stone.

Like a dreamer in a dream, he was wholly absorbed by the mystery on which he had happened; and at no time did he recall his abandoned duty. He lost all reckoning of the time consumed in his descent. Then suddenly, his torch was extinguished by a hot gust that blew upon him like the expelled breath of some prankish demon.

Feeling the assailment of a black panic, he tottered in darkness and sought to secure his footing on the dangerous incline. But, ere he could relume the blown-out torch, he saw that the night around him was not complete, but was tempered by a wan, golden glimmering from the depths below. Forgetting his alarm in a new wonder, he descended toward the mysterious light.

At the bottom of the long incline, Xeethra passed through a low cavern-mouth and emerged into sun-bright radiance. Dazzled and bewildered, he thought for a moment that his subterranean wanderings had brought him back to the outer air in some unsuspected land lying among the Mykrasian hills. Yet surely the region before him was no part of summer-stricken Cincor: for he saw neither hills nor mountains nor the black sapphire heaven from which the aging but despotic sun glared down with implacable drouth on the kingdoms of Zothique.

He stood on the threshold of a fertile plain that lapsed illimitably into golden distance under the measureless arch of a golden vault. Far off, through the misty radiance, there was a dim towering of unidentifiable masses that might have been spires and domes and ramparts. A level meadow lay at his feet, covered with close-grown curling sward that had the greenness of verdigris; and the sward, at intervals, was studded with strange blossoms appearing to turn and move like living eyes. Near at hand, beyond the meadow, was an orchard-like grove of tall, amply spreading trees amid whose lush leafage he descried the burning of numberless dark-red fruits. The plain, to all seeming, was empty of human life; and no birds flew in the fiery air or perched on the laden boughs. There was no sound other than the sighing of leaves: a sound like the hissing of many small hidden serpents.

To the boy from the parched hill-country, this realm was an Eden of untasted delights. But, for a little while, he was stayed by the strangeness of it all, and by the sense of weird and preternatural vitality which informed the whole landscape. Flakes of fire appeared to descend and melt in the rippling air; the grasses coiled with verminous writhings; the flowery eyes returned his regard intently; the trees palpitated as if a sanguine ichor flowed within them in lieu of sap; and the undernote of adder-like hissings amid the foliage grew louder and sharper.

Xeethra, however, was deterred only by the thought that a region so fair and fertile must belong to some jealous owner who would resent his intrusion. He scanned the unpeopled plain with much circumspection. Then, deeming himself secure from observation, he yielded to the craving that had been roused within him by the red, luxuriant fruit.

The turf was elastic beneath him, like a living substance, as he ran forward to the nearest trees. Bowed with their shining globes, the branches drooped around him. He plucked several of the largest fruits and stored

them thriftily in the bosom of his threadbare tunic. Then, unable to resist his appetite any longer, he began to devour one of the fruits. The rind broke easily under his teeth, and it seemed that a royal wine, sweet and puissant, was poured into his mouth from an overbrimming cup. He felt in his throat and bosom a swift warmth that almost suffocated him; and a strange fever sang in his ears and wildered his senses. It passed quickly, and he was startled from his bemusement by the sound of voices falling as if from an airy height.

He knew instantly that the voices were not those of men. They filled his ears with a rolling as of baleful drums, heavy with ominous echoes; yet it seemed that they spoke in articulate words, albeit of a strange language. Looking up between the thick boughs, he beheld a sight that inspired him with terror. Two beings of colossean stature, tall as the watchtowers of the mountain people, stood waist-high above the near treetops. It was as if they had appeared by sorcery from the green ground or the gold heavens: for surely the clumps of vegetation, dwarfed into bushes by their bulk, could never have concealed them from Xeethra's discernment.

The figures were clad in black armor, lusterless and gloomy, such as demons might wear in the service of Thasaidon, lord of the bottomless underworlds. Xeethra felt sure that they had seen him; and perhaps their unintelligible converse concerned his presence. He trembled, thinking now that he had trespassed on the gardens of genii. Peering fearfully from his covert, he could discern no features beneath the frontlets of the dark helms that were bowed toward him: but eye-like spots of yellowish-red fire, restless as marsh-lights, shifted to and from in void shadow where the faces should have been.

It seemed to Xeethra that the rich foliage could afford no shelter from the scrutiny of these beings, the guardians of the land on which he had so rashly

intruded. He was overwhelmed by a consciousness of guilt: the sibilant leaves, the drum-like voices of the giants, the eye-shaped flowers — all appeared to accuse him of trespass and thievery. At the same time he was perplexed by a queer and unwonted vagueness in regard to his own identity: somehow it was not Xeethra the goatherd... but another... who had found the bright garden-realm and had eaten the blood-dark fruit. This alien self was without name or formulable memory; but there was a flickering of confused lights, a murmur of indistinguishable voices, amid the stirred shadows of his mind. Again he felt the weird warmth, the swift-mounting fever, that had followed the devouring of the fruit.

From all this, he was aroused by a livid flash of light that clove downward toward him across the branches. Whether a bolt of levin had issued from the clear vault, or whether one of the armored beings had brandished a great sword, he was never quite sure afterwards. The light seared his vision, he recoiled in uncontrollable fright, and found himself running, half-blind, across the open turf. Through whirling bolts of color he saw before him, in a sheer, topless cliff, the cavern-mouth through which he had come. Behind him he heard a long rumbling as of summer thunder... or the laughter of colossi.

Without pausing to retrieve the still-burning brand he had left at the entrance, Xeethra plunged incontinently into the dark cave. Through Stygian murk he managed to grope his way upward on the perilous incline. Reeling, stumbling, bruising himself at every turn, he came at last to the outer exit, in the hidden valley behind the hills of Cincor.

To his consternation, twilight had fallen during his absence in the world beyond the cave. Stars crowded above the grim crags that walled the valley; and the skies of burnt-out purple were gored by the sharp horn of an ivory moon. Still fearing the pursuit of the giant guardians, and apprehending also

the wrath of his uncle Pornos, Xeethra hastened back to the little tarn, collected his flock, and drove it homeward through the long, gloomy miles.

During that journey, it seemed that a fever burned and died within him at intervals, bringing strange fancies. He forgot his fear of Pornos, forgot, indeed, that he was Xeethra, the humble and disregarded goatherd. He was returning to another abode than the squalid hut of Pornos, built of clay and brushwood. In a high-domed city, gates of burnished metal would open for him, and fiery-colored banners would stream on the perfumed air; and silver trumpets and the voices of blonde odalisques and black chamberlains would greet him as king in a thousand-columned hall. The ancient pomp of royalty, familiar as air and light, would surround him, and he, the King Amero, who had newly come to the throne, would rule as his fathers had ruled over all the kingdom of Calyz by the orient sea. Into his capital, on shaggy camels, the fierce southern tribesmen would bring a levy of date-wine and desert sapphires; and galleys from isles beyond the morning would burden his wharves with their semi-annual tribute of spices and strange-dyed fabrics...

Surging and fading like pictures of delirium but lucid as daily memories, the madness came and went; and once again he was the nephew of Pornos, returning belated with the flock.

Like a downward-thrusting blade, the red moon had fixed itself in the somber hills when Xeethra reached the rough wooden pen in which Pornos kept his goats. Even as Xeethra had expected, the old man was waiting at the gate, bearing in one hand a clay lantern and in the other a staff of briarwood. He began to curse the boy with half-senile vehemence, waving the staff, and threatening to beat him for his tardiness.

Xeethra did not flinch before the staff. Again, in his fancy, he was Amero, the young king of Calyz. Bewildered and astonished, he saw before

him by the light of the shaken lantern a foul and rancid-smelling ancient whom he could not remember. Hardly could he understand the speech of Pornos; the man's anger puzzled but did not frighten him; and his nostrils, as if accustomed only to delicate perfumes, were offended by the goatish stench. As if for the first time, he heard the bleating of the tired flock, and gazed in wild surprise at the wattled pen and the hut beyond.

"Is it for this," cried Pornos, "that I have reared my sister's orphan at great expense? Accursed moon-calf! Thankless whelp! If you have lost a milch-goat or a single kid, I shall flay you from thigh to shoulder."

Deeming that the silence of the youth was due to mere obstinacy, Pornos began to beat him with the staff. At the first blow, the bright cloud lifted from Xeethra's mind. Dodging the briarwood with agility, he tried to tell Pornos of the new pasture he had found among the hills. At this the old man suspended his blows, and Xeethra went on to tell of the strange cave that had conducted him to an unguessed garden-land. To support his story he reached within his tunic for the blood-red apples he had stolen; but, to his confoundment, the fruits were gone, and he knew not whether he had lost them in the dark or whether, perhaps, they had vanished by virtue of some indwelling necromancy.

Pornos, interrupting the boy with frequent scoldings, heard him at first with open unbelief. But he grew silent as the youth went on, and when the story was done, he cried out in a trembling voice:

"Ill was this day, for you have wandered among enchantments. Verily, there is no tarn such as you have described amid the hills; nor, at this season, has any herder found such pasturage. These things were illusions, designed to lead you astray; and the cave, I wot, was no honest cave but an entrance into hell. I have heard my fathers tell that the gardens of Thasaidon, king of the seven underworlds, lie near to the earth's surface in

this region; and caves have opened ere this, like a portal, and the sons of men, trespassing unaware on the gardens, have been tempted by the fruit and eaten it. But madness comes thereof and much sorrow and long damnation: for the Demon, they say, forgetting not one stolen apple, will exact his price in the end. Woe! woe! the goat-milk will be soured for a whole moon by the grass of such wizard pasture; and, after all the food and care you have cost me, I must find another stripling to ward the flocks.”

Once more, as he listened, the burning cloud returned upon Xeethra.

“Old man, I know you not,” he said perplexedly. Then, using soft words of a courtly speech but half-intelligible to Pornos: “It would seem that I have gone astray. Prithee, where lies the kingdom of Calyz? I am king thereof, being newly crowned in the high city of Shathair, over which my fathers have ruled for a thousand years.”

“Ai! Ai!” wailed Pornos. “The boy is daft. These notions have come through the eating of the Demon’s apple. Cease your maundering, and help me to milk the goats. You are none other than the child of my sister Askli, who was delivered these nineteen years ago after her husband, Outhoth, had died of a dysentery. Askli lived not long, and I, Pornos, have reared you as a son, and the goats have mothered you.”

“I must find my kingdom,” persisted Xeethra. “I am lost in darkness, amid uncouth things, and how I have wandered here I cannot remember. Old man, I would have you give me food and lodging for the night. In the dawn I shall journey toward Shathair, by the orient main.”

Pornos, shaking and muttering, lifted his clay lantern to the boy’s face. It seemed that a stranger stood before him, in whose wide and wondering eyes the flame of golden lamps was somehow reflected. There was no wildness in Xeethra’s demeanor, but merely a sort of gentle pride and remoteness; and he wore his threadbare tunic with a strange grace. Surely, however, he

was demented; for his manner and speech were past understanding. Pornos, mumbling under his breath, but no longer urging the boy to assist him, turned to the milking...

* * *

Xeethra woke betimes in the white dawn, and peered with amazement at the mud-plastered walls of the hovel in which he had dwelt since birth. All was alien and baffling to him; and especially was he troubled by his rough garments and by the sun-swart tawnyness of his skin: for such were hardly proper to the young King Amero, whom he believed himself to be. His circumstances were wholly inexplicable; and he felt an urgency to depart at once on his homeward journey.

He rose quietly from the litter of dry grasses that had served him for a bed. Pornos, lying in a corner, still slept the sleep of age and senescence; and Xeethra was careful not to awaken him. He was both puzzled and repelled by this unsavory ancient, who had fed him on the previous evening with coarse millet-bread and the strong milk and cheese of goats, and had given him the hospitality of a fetid hut. He had paid little heed to the mumblings and objurgations of Pornos; but it was plain that the old man doubted his claims to royal rank, and, moreover, was possessed of peculiar delusions regarding his identity.

Leaving the hovel, Xeethra followed an eastward-winding footpath amid the stony hills. He knew not whither the path would lead: but reasoned that Calyz, being the easternmost realm of the continent Zothique, was situated somewhere below the rising sun. Before him, in vision, the verdant vales of his kingdom hovered liked a fair mirage, and the swelling domes of Shathair were as morning cumuli piled in the orient. These things, he deemed, were memories of yesterday. He could not recall the circumstances

of his departure and his absence; but surely the land over which he ruled was not remote.

The path turned among lessening ridges, and Xeethra came to the small village of Cith, to whose inhabitants he was known. The place was alien to him now, seeming no more than a cirque of filthy hovels that reeked and festered under the sun. The people gathered about him, calling him by name, and staring and laughing oafishly when he inquired the road to Calyz. No one, it appeared, had ever heard of this kingdom or of the city of Shathair. Noting a strangeness in Xeethra's demeanor, and deeming that his queries were those of a madman, the people began to mock him. Children pelted him with dry clods and pebbles; and thus he was driven from Cith, following an eastern road that ran from Cincor into the neighboring lowlands of the country of Zhel.

Sustained only by the vision of his lost kingdom, the youth wandered for many moons throughout Zothique. People derided him when he spoke of his kingship and made inquiry concerning Calyz; but many, thinking madness a sacred thing, offered him shelter and sustenance. Amid the far-stretching fruitful vineyards of Zhel, and into Istanam of the myriad cities; over the high passes of Ymorth, where snow tarried at the autumn's beginning; and across the salt-pale desert of Dhir, Xeethra followed that bright imperial dream which had now become his only memory. Always eastward he went, travelling sometimes with caravans whose members hoped that a madman's company would bring them good fortune; but oftener he went as a solitary wayfarer.

At whiles, for a brief space, his dream deserted him, and he was only the simple goatherd, lost in foreign realms, and homesick for the barren hills of Cincor. Then, once more, he remembered his kingship, and the opulent gardens of Shathair and the proud palaces, and the names and faces of them

that had served him following the death of his father, King Eldamaque, and his own succession to the throne.

* * *

At midwinter, in the far city of Sha-Karag, Xeethra met certain sellers of amulets from Ustaim, who smiled oddly when he asked if they could direct him to Calyz. Winking among themselves when he spoke of his royal rank, the merchants told him that Calyz was situated several hundred leagues beyond Sha-Karag, below the orient sun.

“Hail, O King,” they said with mock ceremony. “Long and merrily may you reign in Shathair.”

Very joyful was Xeethra, hearing word of his lost kingdom for the first time, and knowing now that it was more than a dream or a figment of madness. Tarrying no longer in Sha-Karag, he journeyed on with all possible haste...

When the first moon of spring was a frail crescent at eve, he knew that he neared his destination. For Canopus burned high in the eastern heavens, mounting gloriously amid the smaller stars even as he had once seen it from his palace-terrace in Shathair.

His heart leapt with the gladness of homecoming; but much he marvelled at the wildness and sterility of the region through which he passed. It seemed that there were no travellers coming and going from Calyz; and he met only a few nomads, who fled at his approach like the creatures of the waste. The highway was overgrown with grasses and cacti, and was rutted only by the winter rains. Beside it, anon, he came to a stone terminus carved in the form of a rampant lion, that had marked the western boundary of Calyz. The lion's features had crumbled away, and his paws and body were lichenized, and it seemed that long ages of desolation had gone over him. A

chill dismay was born in Xeethra's heart: for only yesteryear, if his memory served him rightly, he had ridden past the lion with his father Eldamaque, hunting hyenas, and had remarked then the newness of the carving.

Now, from the high ridge of the border, he gazed down upon Calyz, which had lain like a long verdant scroll beside the sea. To his wonderment and consternation, the wide fields were sere as if with autumn; the rivers were thin threads that wasted themselves in sand; the hills were gaunt as the ribs of unceremented mummies; and there was no greenery other than the scant herbage which a desert bears in spring. Far off, by the purple main, he thought that he beheld the shining of the marble domes of Shathair; and, fearing that some blight of hostile sorcery had fallen upon his kingdom, he hastened toward the city.

Everywhere, as he wandered heartsick through the vernal day, he found that the desert had established its empire. Void were the fields, unpeopled the villages. The cots had tumbled into midden-like heaps of ruin; and it seemed that a thousand seasons of drouth had withered the fruitful orchards, leaving only a few black and decaying stumps.

In the late afternoon he entered Shathair, which had been the white mistress of the orient sea. The streets and the harbor were alike empty, and silence sat on the broken housetops and the ruining walls. The great bronze obelisks were greened with antiquity; the massy marmorean temples of the gods of Calyz leaned and slanted to their fall.

Tardily, as one who fears to confirm an expected thing, Xeethra came to the palace of the monarchs. Not as he recalled it, a glory of soaring marble half veiled by flowering almonds and trees of spice and high-pulsing fountains, but in stark dilapidation amid blasted gardens, the palace awaited him, while the brief, illusory rose of sunset faded upon its dome, leaving them wan as mausoleums.

How long the place had lain desolate, he could not know. Confusion filled him, and he waswhelmed by utter loss and despair. It seemed that none remained to greet him amid the ruins; but, nearing the portals of the west wing, he saw, as it were, a fluttering of shadows that appeared to detach themselves from the gloom beneath the portico; and certain dubious beings, clothed in rotten tatter, came sidling and crawling before him on the cracked pavement. Pieces of their raiment dropped from them as they moved; and about them was an unnamed horror of filth, of squalor and disease. When they neared him, Xeethra saw that most of them were lacking in some member or feature, and that all were marked by the gnawing of leprosy.

His gorge rose within him, and he could not speak. But the lepers hailed him with hoarse cries and hollow croakings, as if deeming him another outcast who had come to join them in their abode amid the ruins.

“Who are ye that dwell in my palace of Shathair?” he inquired at length. “Behold! I am King Amero, the son of Eldamaque, and I have returned from a far land to resume the throne of Calyz.”

At this, a loathsome cackling and tittering arose among the lepers. “We alone are the kings of Calyz,” one of them told the youth. “The land has been a desert for centuries, and the city of Shathair had long lain unpeople save by such as we, who were driven out from other places. Young man, you are welcome to share the realm with us: for another king, more or less, is a small matter here.”

Then, with obscene cachinnations, the lepers jeered at Xeethra and derided him; and he, standing amid the dark fragments of his dream, could find no words to answer them. However, one of the oldest lepers, well-nigh limbless and faceless, shared not in the mirth of his fellows, but seemed to

ponder and reflect; and he said at last to Xeethra, in a voice issuing thickly from the black pit of his gaping mouth:

“I have heard something of the history of Calyz, and the names of Amero and Eldamaque are familiar to me. In bygone ages certain of the rulers were named thus; but I know not which of them was the son and which the father. Haply both are now entombed with the rest of their dynasty, in the deep-lying vaults beneath the palace.”

Now, in the greying twilight, other lepers emerged from the shadowy ruin and gathered about Xeethra. Hearing that he laid claim to the kingship of the desert realm, certain of their number went away and returned presently, bearing vessels filled with rank water and mouldy victuals, which they proffered to Xeethra, bowing low with a mummary as of chamberlains serving a monarch.

Xeethra turned from them in loathing, though he was famished and athirst. He fled through the ashen gardens, among the dry fountain-mouths and dusty plots. Behind him he heard the hideous mirth of the lepers; but the sound grew fainter, and it seemed that they did not follow him. Rounding the vast palace in his flight, he met no more of these creatures. The portals of the south wing and the east wing were dark and empty, but he did not care to enter them, knowing that desolation and things worse than desolation were the sole tenants.

Wholly distraught and despairing, he came to the eastern wing and paused in the gloom. Dully, and with a sense of dream-like estrangement, he became aware that he stood on that very terrace above the sea, which he had remembered so often during his journey. Bare were the ancient flower-beds; the trees had rotted away in their sunken basins; and the great flags of the pavement were runneled and broken. But the veils of twilight were tender upon the ruin; and the sea sighed as of yore under a purple

shrouding; and the mighty star Canopus climbed in the east, with the lesser stars still faint around him.

Bitter was the heart of Xeethra, thinking himself a dreamer beguiled by some idle dream. He shrank from the high splendor of Canopus, as if from a flame too bright to bear; but, ere he could turn away, it seemed that a column of shadow, darker than the night and thicker than any cloud, rose upward before him from the terrace and blotted out the effulgent star. Out of the solid stone the shadow grew, towering tall and colossal; and it took on the outlines of a mailed warrior; and it seemed that the warrior looked down upon Xeethra from a great height with eyes that shone and shifted like fireballs in the darkness of his face under the lowering helmet.

Confusedly, as one who recalls an old dream, Xeethra remembered a boy who had herded goats upon summer-stricken hills; and who, one day, had found a cavern that opened portal-like on a garden-land of strangeness and marvel. Wandering there, the boy had eaten a blood-dark fruit and had fled in a terror before the black-armored giants who warded the garden. Again he was that boy; and still he was the King Amero, who had sought for his lost realm through many regions; and, finding it in the end, had found only the abomination of desolation.

Now, as the trepidation of the goatherd, guilty of theft and trespass, warred in his soul with the pride of the king, he heard a voice that rolled through the heavens like thunder from a high cloud in the spring night:

“I am the emissary of Thasaidon, who sends me in due course to all who have passed the nether portals and tasted the fruit of his garden. No man, having eaten the fruit, shall remain thereafter as he was before; but to some the fruit brings oblivion, and to others, memory. Know, then, that in another birth, ages ago, you were indeed the young King Amero. The memory,

being strong upon you, has effaced the remembrance of your present life, and has driven you forth to seek your ancient kingdom.”

“If this be true, then doubly am I bereft,” said Xeethra, bowing sorrowfully before the shadow. “For, being Amero, I am throneless and realmless; and, being Xeethra, I cannot forget my former royalty and regain the content which I knew as a simple goatherd.”

“Harken, for there is another way,” said the shadow, its voice muted like the murmur of a far ocean. “Thasaidon is the master of all sorceries, and a giver of magic gifts to those who serve him and acknowledge him as their lord. Pledge your allegiance, promise your soul to him; and in fee thereof, the Demon will surely reward you. If it be your wish, he can wake again the buried past with his necromancy. Again, as King Amero, you shall reign over Calyz; and all things shall be as they were in the perished years; and the dead faces and the fields now desert shall bloom again.”

“I accept the bond,” said Xeethra. “I plight my fealty to Thasaidon, and I promise my soul to him if he, in return, will give me back my kingdom.”

“There is more to be said,” resumed the shadow. “Not wholly have you remembered your other life, but merely those years that correspond to your present youth. Living again as Amero, perhaps you will regret your royalty in time; and if such regret should overcome you, leading you to forget a monarch’s duty, then the whole necromancy shall end and vanish like vapor.”

“So be it,” said Xeethra. “This, too, I accept as part of the bargain.”

When the words ended, he beheld no longer the shadow towering against Canopus. The star flamed with a pristine splendor, as if no cloud had ever dimmed it; and without sense of change or transition, he who watched the star was none other than King Amero; and the goatherd Xeethra, and the emissary, and the pledge given to Thasaidon, were as things that had never

been. The ruin that had come upon Shathair was no more than the dream of some mad prophet; for in the nostrils of Amero the perfume of languorous flowers mingled with salt sea-balsams; and in his ears the grave murmur of ocean was pierced by the amorous plaint of lyres and a shrill laughter of slave-girls from the palace behind him. He heard the myriad noises of the nocturnal city, where his people feasted and made jubilee; and, turning from the star with a mystic pain and an obscure joy in his heart, Amero beheld the effulgent portals and windows of his father's house, and the far-mounting light from a thousand flambeaux that paled the stars as they passed over Shathair.

* * *

It is written in the old chronicles that King Amero reigned for many prosperous years. Peace and abundance were upon all the realm of Calyz; the drouth came not from the desert, nor violent gales from the main; and tribute was sent at the ordained seasons to Amero from the subject isles and outlying lands. And Amero was well content, dwelling superbly in rich-arrased halls, feasting and drinking royally, and hearing the praise of his lute-players and his chamberlains and lemans.

When his life was little past the meridian years, there came at whiles to Amero something of that satiety which lies in wait for the minions of fortune. At such times he turned from the cloying pleasures of the court and found delight in blossoms and leaves and the verses of olden poets. Thus was satiety held at bay; and, since the duties of the realm rested lightly upon him, Amero still found his kingship a goodly thing.

Then, in a latter autumn, it seemed that the stars looked disastrously on Calyz. Murrain and blight and pestilence rode abroad as if on the wings of unseen dragons. The coast of the kingdom was beset and sorely harried by

pirate galleys. Upon the west, the caravans coming and going through Calyz were assailed by redoubtable bands of robbers; and certain fierce desert peoples made war on the villages lying near to the southern border. The land was filled with turmoil and death, with lamentations and many miseries.

Deep was Amero's concern, hearing the distressful complaints that were brought before him daily. Being but little skilled in kingcraft, and wholly untried by the ordeals of dominion, he sought counsel of his courtlings but was ill advised by them. The troubles of the realm multiplied upon him; uncurbed by authority, the wild peoples of the waste grew bolder, and the pirates gathered like vultures of the sea. Famine and drouth divided his realm with the plague; and it seemed to Amero, in his sore perplexity, that such matters were beyond all medication; and his crown was become a too onerous burden.

Striving to forget his own impotence and the woeful plight of his kingdom, he gave himself to long nights of debauch. But the wine refused its oblivion, and love had now forfeited its rapture. He sought other divertissements, calling before him strange makers and mummers and buffoons, and assembling outlandish singers and the players of uncouth instruments. Daily he made proclamations of a high reward to any that could bemuse him from his cares.

Wild songs and sorcerous ballads of yore were sung to him by immortal minstrels; the black girls of the north, with amber-dappled limbs, danced before him their weird lascivious measures; the blowers of the horns of chimeras played a mad and secret tune; and savage drummers pounded a troublous music on drums made from the skin of cannibals; while men clothed with the scales and pelts of half-mythic monsters ramped or crawled

grotesquely through the halls of the palace. But all these were vain to beguile the king from his grievous musings.

One afternoon, as he sat heavily in his hall of audience, there came to him a player of pipes who was clad in tattered homespun. The eyes of the man were bright as newly stirred embers, and his face was burned to a cindery blackness, as if by the ardor of outland suns. Hailing Amero with small servility, he announced himself as a goatherd who had come to Shathair from a region of valleys and mountains lying sequestered beyond the bourn of sunset.

“O King, I know the melodies of oblivion,” he said, “and I would play for you, though I desire not the reward you have offered. If haply I succeed in diverting, I shall take my own guerdon in due time.”

“Play, then,” said Amero, feeling a faint interest rise within him at the bold speech of the piper.

Forthwith, on his pipes of reed, the black goatherd began a music that was like the falling and rippling of water in quiet vales, and the passing of wind over lonely hilltops. Subtly the pipes told of freedom and peace and forgetfulness lying beyond the sevenfold purple of outland horizons. Dulcetly they sang of a place where the years came not with an iron trampling, but were soft of tread as a zephyr shod with flower petals. There the world’s turmoil and troubling were lost upon measureless leagues of silence, and the burdens of empire were blown away like thistledown. There the goatherd, tending his flock on solitary fells, was possessed of tranquillity sweeter than the power of monarchs.

As he listened to the piper, a sorcery crept upon the mind of Amero. The weariness of kingship, the cares and perplexities, were as dream-bubbles lapsing in some Lethean tide. He beheld before him, in sun-bright verdure and stillness, the enchanted vales evoked by the music; and he himself was

the goatherd, following grassy paths, or lying oblivious of the vulture hours by the margin of lulled waters.

Hardly he knew that the low piping had ceased. But the vision darkened, and he who had dreamt of a goatherd's peace was again a troubled king.

"Play on!" he cried to the black piper. "Name your own guerdon — and play."

The eyes of the goatherd burned like embers in a dark place at evening. "Not till the passing of ages and the falling of kingdoms shall I require of you my reward," he said enigmatically. "However, I shall play for you once more."

So, through the afternoon, King Amero was beguiled by that sorcerous piping which told ever of a far land of ease and forgetfulness. With each playing it seemed that the spell grew stronger upon him; and more and more was his royalty a hateful thing; and the very grandeur of his palace oppressed and stifled him. No longer could he endure the heavily jewelled yoke of duty; and madly he envied the carefree lot of the goatherd.

At twilight he dismissed the ministrants who attended him, and held speech alone with the piper.

"Lead me to this land of yours," he said, "where I may dwell as a simple herder."

Clad in mufti, so that his people might not recognise him, the king stole from the palace through an unguarded postern, accompanied by the piper. Night, like a formless monster with the crescent moon for its lowered horn, was crouching beyond the town; but in the streets the shadows were thrust back by a flaming of myriad cressets. Amero and his guide were unchallenged as they went toward the outer darkness. And the king repented not his forsaken throne: though he saw in the city a continual passing of biers laden with the victims of the plague; and faces gaunt with famine rose

up from the shadows as if to accuse him of recreancy. These he heeded not: for his eyes were filled with the dream of a green silent valley, in a land lost beyond the turbid flowing of time with its wreckage and tumult.

Now, as Amero followed the black piper, there descended upon him a sudden dimness; and he faltered in weird doubt and bewilderment. The street-lights flickered before him, and swiftly they expired in the gloom. The loud murmuring of the city fell away in a vast silence; and, like the shifting of some disordered dream, it seemed that the tall houses crumbled stiffly and were gone even as shadows, and the stars shone over broken walls. Confusion filled the thoughts and the sense of Amero; and in his heart was a black chill of desolation; and he seemed to himself as one who had known the lapse of long empty years, and the loss of high splendor; and who stood now amid the extremity of age and decay. In his nostrils was a dry mustiness such as the night draws from olden ruin; and it came to him, as a thing foreknown and now remembered obscurely, that the desert was lord in his proud capital of Shathair.

“Where have you led me?” cried Amero to the piper.

For all reply, he heard a laughter that was like the peal of derisive thunder. The muffled shape of the goatherd towered colossally in the gloom, changing, growing, till its outlines were transformed to those of a giant warrior in sable armor. Strange memories thronged the mind of Amero, and he seemed to recall darkly something of another life... Somehow, somewhere, for a time, he had been the goatherd of his dreams, content and forgetful... somehow, somewhere, he had entered a strange bright garden and had eaten a blood-dark fruit...

Then, in a flaring as of infernal levin, he remembered all, and knew the mighty shadow that towered above him like a Terminus reared in hell. Beneath his feet was the cracked pavement of the seaward terrace; and the

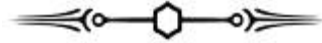
stars above the emissary were those that precede Canopus; but Canopus himself was blotted out by the Demon's shoulder. Somewhere in the dusty darkness, a leper laughed and coughed thickly, prowling about the ruined palace in which had once dwelt the kings of Calyz. All things were even as they had been before the making of that bargain through which the perished kingdom had been raised up by the powers of hell.

Anguish choked the heart of Xeethra as if with the ashes of burnt-out pyres and the shards of heaped ruin. Subtly and manifoldly had the Demon tempted him to his loss. Whether these things had been dream or necromancy or verity he knew not with sureness; nor whether they had happened once or had happened often. In the end there was only dust and dearth; and he, the doubly accurst, must remember and repent forevermore all that he had forfeited.

He cried out to the emissary: "I have lost the bargain that I made with Thasaidon. Take now my soul and bear it before him where he sits aloft on his throne of ever-burning brass; for I would fulfil my bond to the uttermost."

"There is no need to take your soul," said the emissary, with an ominous rumble as of departing storm in the desolate night. "Remain here with the lepers, or return to Pornos and his goats, as you will: it matters little. At all times and in all places your soul shall be part of the dark empire of Thasaidon."

The Holiness of Azédarac



‘BY THE RAM with a Thousand Ewes! By the Tail of Dagon and the Horns of Derceto!’ said Azédarac, as he fingered the tiny, pot-bellied vial of vermilion liquid on the table before him. ‘Something will have to be done with this pestilential Brother Ambrose. I have now learned that he was sent to Ximes by the Archbishop of Averoigne for no other purpose than to gather proof of my subterraneous connection with Azazel and the Old Ones. He has spied upon my evocations in the vaults, he has heard the hidden formulae, and beheld the veritable manifestation of Lilit, and even of Iog-Sotôt and Sodagui, those demons who are more ancient than the world; and this very morning, an hour ago, he has mounted his white ass for the return journey to Vyones. There are two ways — or, in a sense, there is one way — in which I can avoid the bother and inconvenience of a trial for sorcery: the contents of this vial must be administered to Ambrose before he has reached his journey’s end — or, failing this, I myself shall be compelled to make use of a similar medicament.’

Jehan Mauvaissoir looked at the vial and then at Azédarac. He was not at all horrified, nor even surprised, by the non-episcopal oaths and the somewhat uncanonical statements which he had just heard from the Bishop of Ximes. He had known the Bishop too long and too intimately, and had rendered him too many services of an unconventional nature, to be surprised at anything. In fact, he had known Azédarac long before the sorcerer had ever dreamt of becoming a prelate, in a phase of his existence

that was wholly unsuspected by the people of Ximes; and Azédarac had not troubled to keep many secrets from Jehan at any time.

‘I understand,’ said Jehan. ‘You can depend upon it that the contents of the vial will be administered. Brother Ambrose will hardly travel post-haste on that ambling white ass; and he will not reach Vyones before tomorrow noon. There is abundant time to overtake him. Of course, he knows me — at least, he knows Jehan Mauvaissoir... But that can be easily remedied.’

Azédarac smiled confidently. ‘I leave the affair — and the vial — in your hands, Jehan. Of course, no matter what the eventuation, with all the Satanic and pre-Satanic facilities at my disposal, I should be in no great danger from these addlepated bigots. However, I am very comfortably situated here in Ximes; and the lot of a Christian Bishop who lives in the odor of incense and piety, and maintains in a meanwhile a private understanding with the Adversary, is certainly preferable to the mischancy life of a hedgesorcerer. I do not care to be annoyed or disturbed, or ousted from my sinecure, if such can be avoided.

‘May Moloch devour that sanctimonious little milksop of an Ambrose,’ he went on. ‘I must be growing old and dull, not to have suspected him before this. It was the horrorstricken and averted look he has been wearing lately that made me think he had peered through the keyhole on the subterranean rites. Then, when I heard he was leaving, I wisely thought to review my library; and I have found that the *Book of Eibon*, which contains the oldest incantations, and the secret, man-forgotten lore of Iog-Sotôt and Sodagui, is now missing. As you know, I had replaced the former binding of aboriginal, sub-human skin with the sheep-leather of a Christian missal, and had surrounded the volume with rows of legitimate prayer-books. Ambrose is carrying it away under his robe as proof conclusive that I am addicted to the Black Arts. No one in Averoine will be able to read the immemorial

Hyperborean script; but the dragon's-blood illuminations and drawings will be enough to damn me.'

Master and servant regarded each other for an interval of significant silence. Jehan eyed with profound respect the haughty stature, the grimly lined lineaments, the grizzled tonsure, the odd, ruddy, crescent scar on the pallid brow of Azédarac, and the sultry points of orange-yellow fire that seemed to burn deep down in the chill and liquid ebon of his eyes. Azédarac, in his turn, considered with confidence the vulpine features and discreet, inexpressive air of Jehan, who might have been — and could be, if necessary — anything from a mercer to a cleric.

'It is regrettable,' resumed Azédarac, 'that any question of my holiness and devotional probity should have been raised among the clergy of Averoine. But I suppose it was inevitable sooner or later — even though the chief difference between myself and many other ecclesiastics is, that I serve the Devil wittingly and of my own free will, while they do the same in sanctimonious blindness... However, we must do what we can to delay the evil hour of public scandal, and eviction from our neatly feathered nest. Ambrose alone could prove anything to my detriment at present; and you, Jehan, will remove Ambrose to a realm wherein his monkish tattlings will be of small consequence. After that, I shall be doubly vigilant. The next emissary from Vyones, I assure you, will find nothing to report but saintliness and bead-telling.'

II

The thoughts of Brother Ambrose were sorely troubled, and at variance with the tranquil beauty of the sylvan scene, as he rode onward through the forest of Averoine between Ximes and Vyones. Horror was nesting in his heart like a knot of malignant vipers; and the evil *Book of Eibon*, that

primordial manual of sorcery, seemed to burn beneath his robe like a huge, hot, Satanic sigil pressed against his bosom. Not for the first time, there occurred to him the wish that Clément, the Archbishop, had delegated someone else to investigate the Erebean turpitude of Azédarac. Sojourning for a month in the Bishop's household, Ambrose had learned too much for the peace of mind of any pious cleric, and had seen things that were like a secret blot of shame and terror on the white page of his memory. To find that a Christian prelate could serve the powers of nethermost perdition, could entertain in privacy the foulnesses that are older than Asmodai, was abysmally disturbing to his devout soul; and ever since then he had seemed to smell corruption everywhere, and had felt on every side the serpentine encroachment of the dark Adversary.

As he rode on among the somber pines and verdant beeches, he wished also that he were mounted on something swifter than the gentle, milk-white ass appointed for his use by the Archbishop. He was dogged by the shadowy intimation of leering gargoyle faces, of invisible cloven feet, that followed him behind the thronging trees and along the umbrageous meanderings of the road. In the oblique rays, the elongated webs of shadow wrought by the dying afternoon, the forest seemed to attend with bated breath the noisome and furtive passing of innominate things. Nevertheless, Ambrose had met no one for miles; and he had seen neither bird nor beast nor viper in the summer woods.

His thoughts returned with fearful insistence to Azédarac, who appeared to him as a tall, prodigious Antichrist, uprearing his sable vans and giant figure from out the flaming mire of Abaddon. Again he saw the vaults beneath the Bishop's mansion, wherein he had peered one night on a scene of infernal terror and loathsomeness, had beheld the Bishop swathed in the gorgeous, coiling fumes of unholy censers, that mingled in midair with the

sulfurous and bituminous vapors of the Pit; and through the vapors had seen the lasciviously swaying limbs, the bellying and dissolving features of foul enormous entities... Recalling them, again he trembled at the pre-Adamite lubriciousness of Lilit, again he shuddered at the trans-galactic horror of the demon Sodagui, and the ultra-dimensional hideousness of that being known as Iog-Sotôt to the sorcerers of Averoigne.

How balefully potent and subversive, he thought, were these immemorial devils, who had placed their servant Azédarac in the very bosom of the Church, in a position of high and holy trust. For nine years the evil prelate had held an unchallenged and unsuspected tenure, had befouled the bishopric of Ximes with infidelities that were worse than those of the Paynims. Then, somehow, through anonymous channels, a rumour had reached Clément — a warning whisper that not even the Archbishop had dared to voice aloud; and Ambrose, a young Benedictine monk, the nephew of Clément, had been dispatched to examine privily the festering foulness that threatened the integrity of the Church. Only at that time did anyone recall how little was actually known regarding the antecedents of Azédarac; how tenuous were his claims to ecclesiastical preferment, or even to mere priesthood; how veiled and doubtful were the steps by which he had attained his office. It was then realized that a formidable wizardry had been at work.

Uneasily, Ambrose wondered if Azédarac had already discovered the removal of the *Book of Eibon* from among the missals contaminated by its blasphemous presence. Even more uneasily, he wondered what Azédarac would do in that event, and how long it would take him to connect the absence of the volume with his visitor's departure.

At this point, the meditations of Ambrose were interrupted by the hard clatter of galloping hoofs that approached from behind. The emergence of a centaur from the oldest wood of paganism could scarcely have startled him

to a keener panic; and he peered apprehensively over his shoulder at the nearing horseman. This person, mounted on a fine black steed with opulent trappings, was a bushy-bearded man of obvious consequence; for his gay garments were those of a noble or a courtier. He overtook Ambrose and passed on with a polite nod, seeming to be wholly intent on his own affairs. The monk was immensely reassured, though vaguely troubled for some moments by a feeling that he had seen elsewhere, under circumstances which he was unable to recall, the narrow eyes and sharp profile that contrasted so oddly with the bluff beard of the horseman. However, he was comfortably sure that he had never seen the man in Ximes. The rider soon vanished beyond a leafy turn of the arboreal highway. Ambrose returned to the pious horror and apprehensiveness of his former soliloquy.

As he went on, it seemed to him that the sun had gone down with untimely and appalling swiftness. Though the heavens above were innocent of cloud, and the low-lying air was free from vapors, the woods were embrowned by an inexplicable gloom that gathered visibly on all sides. In this gloom, the trunks of the trees were strangely distorted, and the low masses of foliage assumed unnatural and disquieting forms. It appeared to Ambrose that the silence around him was a fragile film through which the raucous rumble and mutter of diabolic voices might break at any moment, even as the foul and sunken driftage that rises anon above the surface of a smoothly flowing river.

With much relief, he remembered that he was not far from a wayside tavern, known as the Inn of Bonne Jouissance. Here, since his journey to Vyones was little more than half completed, he resolved to tarry for the night.

A minute more, and he saw the lights of the inn. Before their benign and golden radiance, the equivocal forest shadows that attended him seemed to

halt and retire and he gained the haven of the tavern courtyard with the feeling of one who has barely escaped from an army of goblin perils.

Committing his mount to the care of a stable-servant, Ambrose entered the main room of the inn. Here he was greeted with the deference due to his cloth by the stout and unctuous taverner; and, being assured that the best accommodations of the place were at his disposal, he seated himself at one of several tables where other guests had already gathered to await the evening meal.

Among them, Ambrose recognized the bluff-bearded horseman who had overtaken him in the woods an hour ago. This person was sitting alone, and a little apart. The other guests, a couple of travelling mercers, a notary, and two soldiers, acknowledged the presence of the monk with all due civility; but the horseman arose from his table, and coming over to Ambrose, began immediately to make overtures that were more than those of common courtesy.

‘Will you not dine with me, sir monk?’ he invited, in a gruff but ingratiating voice that was perplexingly familiar to Ambrose, and yet, like the wolfish profile, was irrecognizable at the time.

‘I am the Sieur des Émaux, from Touraine, at your service,’ the man went on. ‘It would seem that we are traveling the same road — possibly to the same destination. Mine is the cathedral city of Vyones. And yours?’

Though he was vaguely perturbed, and even a little suspicious, Ambrose found himself unable to decline the invitation. In reply to the last question, he admitted that he also was on his way to Vyones. He did not altogether like the Sieur des Émaux, whose slitted eyes gave back the candle-light of the inn with a covert glitter, and whose manner was somewhat effusive, not to say fulsome. But there seemed to be no ostensible reason for refusing a

courtesy that was doubtless well-meant and genuine. He accompanied his host to their separate table.

‘You belong to the Benedictine order, I observe,’ said the *Sieur des Émaux*, eyeing the monk with an odd smile that was tinged with furtive irony. ‘It is an order that I have always admired greatly — a most noble and worthy brotherhood. May I not inquire your name?’

Ambrose gave the requested information with a curious reluctance.

‘Well, then, Brother Ambrose,’ said the *Sieur des Émaux*, ‘I suggest that we drink to your health and the prosperity of your order in the red wine of *Averoigne* while we are waiting for supper to be served. Wine is always welcome following a long journey, and is no less beneficial before a good meal than after.’

Ambrose mumbled an unwilling assent. He could not have told why, but the personality of the man was more and more distasteful to him. He seemed to detect a sinister undertone in the purring voice, to surprise an evil meaning in the low-lidded glance. And all the while his brain was tantalized by intimations of a forgotten memory. Had he seen his interlocutor in *Ximes*? Was the self-styled *Sieur des Émaux* a henchman of *Azédarac* in disguise?

Wine was now ordered by his host, who left the table to confer with the innkeeper for this purpose, and even insisted on paying a visit to the cellar, that he might select a suitable vintage in person. Noting the obeisance paid to the man by the people of the tavern, who addressed him by name, Ambrose felt a certain measure of reassurance. When the taverner, followed by the *Sieur des Émaux*, returned with two earthen pitchers of wine, he had well-nigh succeeded in dismissing his vague doubts and vaguer fears. Two large goblets were now placed on the table, and the *Sieur des Émaux* filled them immediately from one of the pitchers. It seemed to Ambrose that the

first of the goblets already contained a small amount of some sanguine fluid, before the wine was poured into it; but he could not have sworn to this in the dim light, and thought that he must have been mistaken.

‘Here are two matchless vintages,’ said the *Sieur des Émaux*, indicating the pitchers. ‘Both are so excellent that I was unable to choose between them; but you, Brother Ambrose, are perhaps capable of deciding their merits with a finer palate than mine.’

He pushed one of the filled goblets toward Ambrose. ‘This is the wine of *La Frenaie*,’ he said. ‘Drink, it will verily transport you from the world by virtue of the mighty fire that slumbers in its heart.’

Ambrose took the proffered goblet, and raised it to his lips. The *Sieur des Émaux* was bending forward above his own wine to inhale its bouquet; and something in his posture was terrifyingly familiar to Ambrose. In a chill flash of horror, his memory told him that the thin, pointed features behind the square beard were dubiously similar to those of *Jehan Mauvaissoir*, whom he had often seen in the household of *Azédarac*, and who, as he had reason to believe, was implicated in the Bishop’s sorceries. He wondered why he had not placed the resemblance before, and what wizardry had drugged his powers of recollection. Even now he was not sure; but the mere suspicion terrified him as if some deadly serpent had reared its head across the table.

‘Drink, Brother Ambrose,’ urged the *Sieur des Émaux*, draining his own goblet. ‘To your welfare and that of all good Benedictines.’

Ambrose hesitated. The cold, hypnotic eyes of his interlocutor were upon him, and he was powerless to refuse, in spite of all his apprehensions. Shuddering slightly, with the sense of some irresistible compulsion, and feeling that he might drop dead from the virulent working of a sudden poison, he emptied his goblet.

An instant more, and he felt that his worst fears had been justified. The wine burned like the liquid flames of Phlegeton in his throat and on his lips; it seemed to fill his veins with a hot, infernal quicksilver. Then, all at once, an unbearable cold had inundated his being; an icy whirlwind wrapped him round with coils of roaring air, the chair melted beneath him, and he was falling through endless glacial gulfs. The walls of the inn had flown like receding vapors; the lights went out like stars in the black mist of a marish; and the face of the *Sieur des Émaux* faded with them on the swirling shadows, even as a bubble that breaks on the milling of midnight waters.

III

It was with some difficulty that Ambrose assured himself that he was not dead. He had seemed to fall eternally, through a gray night that was peopled with ever-changing forms, with blurred unstable masses that dissolved to other masses before they could assume definitude. For a moment, he thought there were walls about him once more; and then he was plunging from terrace to terrace of a world of phantom trees. At whiles, he thought also that there were human faces; but all was doubtful and evanescent, all was drifting smoke and surging shadow.

Abruptly, with no sense of transition or impact, he found that he was no longer falling. The vague fantasmagoria around him had returned to an actual scene — but a scene in which there was no trace of the Inn of *Bonne Jouissance*, or the *Sieur des Émaux*.

Ambrose peered about with incredulous eyes on a situation that was truly unbelievable. He was sitting in broad daylight on a large square block of roughly hewn granite. Around him, at a little distance, beyond the open space of a grassy glade, were the lofty pines and spreading beeches of an

elder forest, whose boughs were already touched by the gold of the declining sun. Immediately before him, several men were standing.

These men appeared to regard Ambrose with a profound and almost religious amazement. They were bearded and savage of aspect, with white robes of a fashion he had never before seen. Their hair was long and matted, like tangles of black snakes; and their eyes burned with a frenetic fire. Each of them bore in his right hand a rude knife of sharply chiselled stone.

Ambrose wondered if he had died after all, and if these beings were the strange devils of some unlisted hell. In the face of what had happened, and the light of Ambrose's own beliefs, it was a far from unreasonable conjecture. He peered with fearful trepidation at the supposed demons, and began to mumble a prayer to the God who had abandoned him so inexplicably to his spiritual foes. Then he remembered the necromantic powers of Azédarac, and conceived another surmise — that he had been spirited bodily away from the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, and delivered into the hands of those pre-Satanic entities that served the sorcerous Bishop. Becoming convinced of his own physical solidity and integrity, and reflecting that such was scarcely the appropriate condition of a disincarnate soul, and also that the sylvan scene about him was hardly characteristic of the infernal regions, he accepted this as the true explanation. He was still alive, and still on earth, though the circumstances of his situation were more than mysterious, and were fraught with dire, unknowable danger.

The strange beings had maintained an utter silence, as if they were too dumbfounded for speech. Hearing the prayerful murmurs of Ambrose, they seemed to recover from their surprise, and became not only articulate but vociferous. Ambrose could make nothing of their harsh vocables, in which sibilants and aspirates and gutturals were often combined in a manner difficult for the normal human tongue to imitate. However, he caught the

word 'taranit', several times repeated, and wondered if it were the name of an especially malevolent demon.

The speech of the weird beings began to assume a sort of rude rhythm, like the intonations of some primordial chant. Two of them stepped forward and seized Ambrose, while the voices of their companions rose in a shrill, triumphant litany.

Scarcely knowing what had happened, and still less what was to follow, Ambrose was flung supine on the granite block, and was held down by one of his captors, while the other raised aloft the keen blade of chiselled flint which he carried. The blade was poised in the air above Ambrose's heart, and the monk realized in sudden terror that it would fall with dire velocity and pierce him through before the lapse of another moment.

Then, above the demoniac chanting, which had risen to a mad, malignant frenzy, he heard the sweet and imperious cry of a woman's voice. In the wild confusion of his terror, the words were strange and meaningless to him; but plainly they were understood by his captors, and were taken as an undeniable command. The stone knife was lowered sullenly, and Ambrose was permitted to resume a sitting posture on the flat slab.

His rescuer was standing on the edge of the open glade, in the wide-flung umbrage of an ancient pine. She came forward now; and the white-garmented beings fell back with evident respect before her. She was very tall, with a fearless and regal demeanor, and was gowned in a dark shimmering blue, like the star-laden blue of nocturnal summer skies. Her hair was knotted in a long golden-brown braid, heavy as the glistening coils of some eastern serpent. Her eyes were a strange amber, her lips a vermilion touched with the coolness of woodland shadow, and her skin was of alabastrine fairness. Ambrose saw that she was beautiful; but she inspired him with the same awe that he would have felt before a queen, together

with something of the fear and consternation which a virtuous young monk would conceive in the perilous presence of an alluring succubus.

‘Come with me,’ she said to Ambrose, in a tongue that his monastic studies enabled him to recognize as an obsolete variant of the French of Averroigne — a tongue that no man had supposedly spoken for many hundred years. Obediently and in great wonder, he arose and followed her, with no hindrance from his glowering and reluctant captors.

The woman led him to a narrow path that wound sinuously away through the deep forest. In a few moments, the glade, the granite block, and the cluster of white-robed men were lost to sight behind the heavy foliage.

‘Who are you?’ asked the lady, turning to Ambrose. ‘You look like one of those crazy missionaries who are beginning to enter Averroigne nowadays. I believe that people call them Christians. The Druids have sacrificed so many of them to Taranit, that I marvel at your temerity in coming here.’

Ambrose found it difficult to comprehend the archaic phrasing; and the import of her words was so utterly strange and baffling that he felt sure he must have misunderstood her.

‘I am Brother Ambrose,’ he replied, expressing himself slowly and awkwardly in the long-disused dialect. ‘Of course, I am a Christian; but I confess that I fail to understand you. I have heard of the pagan Druids; but surely they were all driven from Averroigne many centuries ago.’

The woman stared at Ambrose, with open amazement and pity. Her brownish-yellow eyes were bright and clear as a mellowed wine.

‘Poor little one,’ she said. ‘I fear that your dreadful experiences have served to unsettle you. It was fortunate that I came along when I did, and decided to intervene. I seldom interfere with the Druids and their sacrifices;

but I saw you sitting on their altar a little while ago, and was struck by your youth and comeliness.'

Ambrose felt more and more that he had been made the victim of a most peculiar sorcery; but, even yet, he was far from suspecting the true magnitude of this sorcery. Amid his bemusement and consternation, however, he realized that he owed his life to the singular and lovely woman beside him, and began to stammer out his gratitude.

'You need not thank me,' said the lady, with a dulcet smile. 'I am Moriamis, the enchantress, and the Druids fear my magic, which is more sovereign and more excellent than theirs, though I use it only for the welfare of men and not for their bale or bane.' The monk was dismayed to learn that his fair rescuer was a sorceress, even though her powers were professedly benignant. The knowledge added to his alarm; but he felt that it would be politic to conceal his emotions in this regard.

'Indeed, I am grateful to you,' he protested. 'And now, if you can tell me the way to the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, which I left not long ago, I shall owe you a further debt.' Moriamis knitted her light brows. 'I have never heard of the Inn of Bonne Jouissance. There is no such place in this region.'

'But this is the forest of Averoigne, is it not?' inquired the puzzled Ambrose. 'And surely we are not far from the road that runs between the town of Ximes and the city of Vyones?'

'I have never heard of Ximes, or Vyones, either,' said Moriamis. 'Truly, the land is known as Averoigne, and this forest is the great wood of Averoigne, which men have called by that name from primeval years. But there are no towns such as the ones whereof you speak, Brother Ambrose. I fear that you still wander a little in your mind.' Ambrose was aware of a maddening perplexity. 'I have been most damnably beguiled,' he said, half

to himself. 'It is all the doing of that abominable sorcerer, Azédarac, I am sure.

The woman started as if she had been stung by a wild bee. There was something both eager and severe in the searching gaze that she turned upon Ambrose.

'Azédarac?' she queried. 'What do you know of Azédarac? I was once acquainted with someone by that name; and I wonder if it could be the same person. Is he tall and a little gray, with hot, dark eyes, and a proud, half-angry air, and a crescent scar on the brow?'

Greatly mystified, and more troubled than ever, Ambrose admitted the veracity of her description. Realizing that in some unknown way he had stumbled upon the hidden antecedents of the sorcerer, he confided the story of his adventures to Moriamis, hoping that she would reciprocate with further information concerning Azédarac.

The woman listened with the air of one who is much interested but not at all surprised.

'I understand now,' she observed, when he had finished. 'Anon I shall explain everything that mystifies and troubles you. I think I know this Jehan Mauvaissoir, also; he has long been the man-servant of Azédarac, though his name was Melchire in other days. These two have always been the underlings of evil, and have served the Old Ones in ways forgotten or never known by the Druids.'

'Indeed, I hope you can explain what has happened,' said Ambrose. 'It is a fearsome and strange and ungodly thing, to drink a draft of wine in a tavern at eventide, and then find one's self in the heart of the forest by afternoon daylight, among demons such as those from whom you succored me.'

‘Yea,’ countered Moriamis ‘it is even stranger than you dream. Tell me, Brother Ambrose, what was the year in which you entered the Inn of Bonne Jouissance?’

‘Why, it is the year of our Lord, 1175, of course. What other year could it be?’

‘The Druids use a different chronology,’ replied Moriamis, ‘and their notation would mean nothing to you. But, according to that which the Christian missionaries would now introduce in Averroigne, the present year is A.D. 475. You have been sent back no less than seven hundred years into what the people of your era would regard as the past. The Druid altar on which I found you lying is probably located on the future site of the Inn of Bonne Jouissance.’

Ambrose was more than dumbfounded. His mind was unable to grasp the entire import of Moriamis’ words.

‘But how can such things be?’ he cried. ‘How can a man go backward in time, among years and people that have long turned to dust?’

‘That, mayhap, is a mystery for Azédarac to unriddle. However, the past and the future co-exist with what we call the present, and are merely the two segments of the circle of time. We see them and name them according to our own position in the circle.’

Ambrose felt that he had fallen among necromancies of a most unhallowed and unexampled sort, and had been made the victim of diableries unknown to the Christian catalogues.

Tongue-tied by a consciousness that all comment, all protest or even prayer would prove inadequate to the situation, he saw that a stone tower with small lozenge-shaped windows was now visible above the turrets of pine along the path which he and Moriamis were following.

‘This is my home,’ said Moriamis, as they came forth from beneath the thinning trees at the foot of a little knoll on which the tower was situated. ‘Brother Ambrose, you must be my guest.’

Ambrose was unable to decline the proffered hospitality, in spite of his feeling that Moriamis was hardly the most suitable of chatelaines for a chaste and God-fearing monk. However, the pious misgivings with which she inspired him were not unmingled with fascination. Also, like a lost child, he clung to the only available protection in a land of fearful perils and astounding mysteries.

The interior of the tower was neat and clean and homelike, though with furniture of a ruder sort than that to which Ambrose was accustomed, and rich but roughly woven arrases. A serving-woman, tall as Moriamis herself, but darker, brought to him a huge bowl of milk and wheaten bread, and the monk was now able to assuage the hunger that had gone unsatisfied in the Inn of Bonne Jouissance.

As he seated himself before the simple fare, he realized that the *Book of Eibon* was still heavy in the bosom of his gown. He removed the volume, and gave it gingerly to Moriamis. Her eyes widened, but she made no comment until he had finished his meal. Then she said:

‘This volume is indeed the property of Azédarac, who was formerly a neighbor of mine. I knew the scoundrel quite well — in fact, I knew him all too well.’ Her bosom heaved with an obscure emotion as she paused for a moment. ‘He was the wisest and the mightiest of sorcerers, and the most secret withal; for no one knew the time and the manner of his coming into Averoigne, or the fashion in which he had procured the immemorial *Book of Eibon*, whose runic writings were beyond the lore of all other wizards. He was master of all enchantments and all demons, and likewise a compounder of mighty potions. Among these were certain philtres, blended with potent

spells and possessed of unique virtue, that would send the drinker backward or forward in time. One of them, I believe, was administered to you by Melchire, or Jehan Mauvaissoir; and Azédarac himself, together with this man-servant, made use of another — perhaps not for the first time — when they went onward from the present age of the Druids into that age of Christian authority to which you belong. There was a blood-red vial for the past, and a green for the future. Behold! I possess one of each — though Azédarac was unaware that I knew of their existence.’

She opened a little cupboard, in which were the various charms and medicaments, the sun-dried herbs and mooncompounded essences that a sorceress would employ. From among them she brought out the two vials, one of which contained a sanguine-colored liquid, and the other a fluid of emerald brightness.

‘I stole them one day, out of womanly curiosity, from his hidden store of philtres and elixirs and nagistrals,’ continued Moriamis. ‘I could have followed the rascal when he disappeared into the future, if I had chosen to do so. But I am well enough content with my own age; and moreover, I am not the sort of woman who pursues a wearied and reluctant lover...’

‘Then,’ said Ambrose, more bewildered than ever, but hopeful, ‘if I were to drink the contents of the green vial, I should return to my own epoch.’

‘Precisely. And I am sure, from what you have told me, that your return would be a source of much annoyance to Azédarac. It is like the fellow, to have established himself in a fat prelacy. He was ever the master of circumstance, with an eye to his own accommodation and comfort. It would hardly please him, I am sure, if you were to reach the Archbishop... I am not revengeful by nature ... but on the other hand—’

‘It is hard to understand how anyone could have wearied of you,’ said Ambrose, gallantly, as he began to comprehend the situation.

Moriamis smiled. 'That is prettily said. And you are really a charming youth, in spite of that dismal-looking robe. I am glad that I rescued you from the Druids, who would have torn your heart out and offered it to their demon, Taranit.'

'And now you will send me back?'

Moriamis frowned a little, and then assumed her most seductive air.

'Are you in such a hurry to leave your hostess? Now that you are living in another century than your own, a day, a week, or a month will make no difference in the date of your return. I have also retained the formulas of Azédarac; and I know how to graduate the potion, if necessary. The usual period of transportation in time is exactly seven hundred years; but the philtre can be strengthened or weakened a little.'

The sun had fallen beyond the pines, and a soft twilight was beginning to invade the tower. The maid-servant had left the room. Moriamis came over and seated herself beside Ambrose on the rough bench he was occupying. Still smiling, she fixed her amber eyes upon him, with a languid flame in their depths — a flame that seemed to brighten as the dusk grew stronger. Without speaking, she began slowly to unbraid her heavy hair, from which there emanated a perfume that was subtle and delicious as the perfume of grape-flowers.

Ambrose was embarrassed by this delightful proximity. 'I am not sure that it would be right for me to remain, after all. What would the Archbishop think?'

'My dear child, the Archbishop will not even be born for at least six hundred and fifty years. And it will be still longer before you are born. And when you return, anything that you have done during your stay with me will have happened no less than seven centuries ago ... which should be long enough to procure the remission of any sin, no matter how often repeated.'

Like a man who has been taken in the toils of some fantastic dream, and finds that the dream is not altogether disagreeable, Ambrose yielded to this feminine and irrefutable reasoning. He hardly knew what was to happen; but, under the exceptional circumstances indicated by Moriamis, the rigors of monastic discipline might well be relaxed to almost any conceivable degree, without entailing spiritual perdition or even a serious breach of vows.

IV

A month later, Moriamis and Ambrose were standing beside the Druid altar. It was late in the evening; and a slightly gibbous moon had risen upon the deserted glade and was fringing the tree-tops with wefted silver. The warm breath of the summer night was gentle as the sighing of a woman in slumber.

‘Must you go, after all?’ said Moriamis, in a pleading and regretful voice.

‘It is my duty. I must return to Clément with the *Book of Eibon* and the other evidence I have collected against Azédarac.’ The words sounded a little unreal to Ambrose as he uttered them; and he tried very hard, but vainly, to convince himself of the cogency and validity of his arguments. The idyll of his stay with Moriamis, to which he was oddly unable to attach any true conviction of sin, had given to all that preceded it a certain dismal insubstantiality. Free of all responsibility or restraint, in the sheer obliviousness of dreams, he had lived like a happy pagan; and now he must go back to the drear existence of a mediaeval monk, beneath the prompting of an obscure sense of duty.

‘I shall not try to hold you,’ Moriamis sighed. ‘But I shall miss you, and remember you as a worthy lover and a pleasant playmate. Here is the

philtre.’ The green essence was cold and almost hueless in the moonlight, as Moriamis poured it into a little cup and gave it to Ambrose.

‘Are you sure of its precise efficacy?’ the monk inquired. ‘Are you sure that I shall return to the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, at a time not far subsequent to that of my departure therefrom?’

‘Yea,’ said Moriamis, ‘for the potion is infallible. But stay, I have also brought along the other vial — the vial of the past. Take it with you — for who knows, you may sometime wish to return and visit me again.’

Ambrose accepted the red vial and placed it in his robe beside the ancient manual of Hyperborean sorcery. Then, after an appropriate farewell to Moriamis, he drained with sudden resolution the contents of the cup.

The moonlit glade, the gray altar, and Moriamis, all vanished in a swirl of flame and shadow. It seemed to Ambrose that he was soaring endlessly through fantasmagoric gulfs, amid the ceaseless shifting and melting of unstable things, the transient forming and fading of irresoluble worlds. At the end, he found himself sitting once more in the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, at what he assumed to be the very same table before which he had sat with the *Sieur des Émaux*. It was daylight, and the room was full of people, among whom he looked in vain for the rubicund face of the innkeeper, or the servants and fellow-guests he had previously seen. All were unfamiliar to him; and the furniture was strangely worn, and was grimmer than he remembered it.

Perceiving the presence of Ambrose, the people began to eye him with open curiosity and wonderment. A tall man with dolorous eyes and lantern jaws came hastily forward and bowed before him with an air that was half servile but full of a prying impertinence.

‘What do you wish?’ he asked.

‘Is this the Inn of Bonne Jouissance?’

The innkeeper stared at Ambrose. ‘Nay, it is the Inn of Haute Esperance, of which I have been the taverner these thirty years. Could you not read the sign? It was called the Inn of Bonne Jouissance in my father’s time, but the name was changed after his death.’

Ambrose was filled with consternation. ‘But the inn was differently named, and was kept by another man when I visited it not long ago,’ he cried in bewilderment. ‘The owner was a stout, jovial man, not in the least like you.’

‘That would answer the description of my father,’ said the taverner, eyeing Ambrose more dubiously than ever. ‘He has been dead for the full thirty years of which I speak; and surely you were not even born at the time of his decease.’

Ambrose began to realize what had happened. The emerald potion, by some error or excess of potency, had taken him many years beyond his own time into the future!

‘I must resume my journey to Vyones,’ he said in a bewildered voice, without fully comprehending the implications of his situation. ‘I have a message for the Archbishop Clément — and must not delay longer in delivering it.’

‘But Clément has been dead even longer than my father,’ exclaimed the inn-keeper. ‘From whence do you come, that you are ignorant of this?’ It was plain from his manner that he had begun to doubt the sanity of Ambrose. Others, overhearing the strange discussion, had begun to crowd about, and were plying the monk with jocular and sometimes ribald questions.

‘And what of Azédarac, the Bishop of Ximes? Is he dead, too?’ inquired Ambrose, desperately. ‘You mean St. Azédarac, no doubt. He outlived Clément, but nevertheless he has been dead and duly canonized for thirty-

two years. Some say that he did not die, but was transported to heaven alive, and that his body was never buried in the great mausoleum reared for him at Ximes. But that is probably a mere legend.'

Ambrose was overwhelmed with unspeakable desolation and confusion. In the meanwhile, the crowd about him had increased, and in spite of his robe, he was being made the subject of rude remarks and jeers.

'The good Brother has lost his wits,' cried some. 'The wines of Averoine are too strong for him,' said others. 'What year is this?' demanded Ambrose, in his desperation.

'The year of our Lord, 1230,' replied the taverner, breaking into a derisive laugh. 'And what year did you think it was?'

'It was the year 1175 when I last visited the Inn of Bonne Jouissance,' admitted Ambrose.

His declaration was greeted with fresh jeers and laughter. 'Hola, young sir, you were not even conceived at that time,' the taverner said. Then, seeming to remember something, he went on in a more thoughtful tone: 'When I was a child, my father told me of a young monk, about your age, who came to the Inn of Bonne Jouissance one evening in the summer of 1175, and vanished inexplicably after drinking a draft of red wine. I believe his name was Ambrose. Perhaps you are Ambrose, and have only just returned from a visit to nowhere.' He gave a derisory wink, and the new jest was taken up and bandied from mouth to mouth among the frequenters of the tavern.

Ambrose was trying to realize the full import of his predicament. His mission was now useless, through the death or disappearance of Azédarac; and no one would remain in all Averoine to recognize him or believe his story. He felt the hopelessness of his alienation among unknown years and people.

Suddenly he remembered the red vial given him at parting by Moriamis. The potion, like the green philtre, might prove uncertain in its effect; but he was seized by an allconsuming desire to escape from the weird embarrassment and wilderment of his present position. Also, he longed for Moriamis like a lost child for its mother; and the charm of his sojourn in the past was upon him with an irresistible spell. Ignoring the ribald faces and voices about him, he drew the vial from his bosom, uncorked it, and swallowed the contents...

V

He was back in the forest glade, by the gigantic altar. Moriamis was beside him again, lovely and warm and breathing; and the moon was still rising above the pinetops. It seemed that no more than a few moments could have elapsed since he had said farewell to the beloved enchantress. 'I thought you might return,' said Moriamis. 'And I waited a little while.'

Ambrose told her of the singular mishap that had attended his journey in time.

Moriamis nodded gravely. 'The green philtre was more potent than I had supposed,' she remarked. 'It is fortunate, though, that the red philtre was equivalently strong, and could bring you back to me through all those added years. You will have to remain with me now, for I possessed only the two vials. I hope you are not sorry.'

Ambrose proceeded to prove, in a somewhat unmonastic manner, that her hope was fully justified.

Neither then nor at any other time did Moriamis tell him that she herself had strengthened slightly and equally the two philtres by means of the private formula which she had also stolen from Azédarac.

The Beast of Averroigne

1. The Deposition of Brother Gerome

I, a poor scrivener and the humblest monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Perigon, have been asked by our abbot Theophile to write down this record of a strange evil that is still rampant, still unquelled. And, ere I have done writing, it may be that the evil shall come forth again from its lurking-place, and again be manifest.

We, the friars of Perigon, and all others who have knowledge of this thing, agree that its advent was coeval with the first rising of the red comet which still burns nightly, a flying balefire, above the moonless hills. Like Satan's rutilant hair, trailing on the wind of Gehenna as he hastens worldward, it rose below the Dragon [Lion] in early summer; and now it follows the Scorpion toward the western woods. Some say that the horror came from the comet, flying without wings to earth across the stars. And truly, before this summer of 1369, and the lifting of that red, disastrous scourge upon the heavens, there was no rumor or legend of such a thing in all Averaigne.

As for me, I must deem that the beast is a spawn of the seventh hell, a foulness born of the bubbling, flame-blent ooze; for it has no likeness to the beasts of earth, to the creatures of air and water. And the comet may well have been the fiery vehicle of its coming.

To me, for my sins and unworthiness, was it first given to behold the beast. Surely the sight thereof was a warning of those ways which lead to perdition: for on that occasion I had broken the rule of St. Benedict which forbids eating during a one-day's errand away from the monastery. I had tarried late, after bearing a letter from Theophile to the good priest of Ste. Zenobie, though I should have been back well before evensong. And also, apart from eating, I had drunk the mellow white wine of Ste. Zenobie with

its kindly people. Doubtless because I had done these things, I met the nameless, night-born terror in the woods behind the abbey when I returned.

The day had vanished, fading unaware; and the long summer eve, without moon, had thickened to a still and eldritch darkness ere I approached the abbey postern. And hurrying along the forest path, I felt an eerie fear of the gnarled, hunchback oaks and their pit-deep shadows. And when I saw between their antic boughs the vengefully streaming fire of the new comet, which seemed to pursue me as I went, the goodly warmth of the wine died out and I began to regret my truancy. For I knew that the comet was a harbinger of ill, an omen of death and Satanry to come.

Now, as I passed among the ancient trees that tower thickly, growing toward the postern, I thought that I beheld a light from one of the abbey windows and was much cheered thereby. But, going on, I saw that the light was near at hand, beneath a lowering bough beside my path; and moreover, it moved as with the flitting of a restless fenfire, and was wholly dissimilar to the honest glow of a lamp, lantern or taper. And the light was of changeable color, being pale as a corposant, or ruddy as new-spilled blood, or green as the poisonous distillation that surrounds the moon.

Then, with ineffable terror, I beheld the thing to which the light clung like a hellish nimbus, moving as it moved, and revealing dimly the black abomination of head and limbs that were not those of any creature wrought by God. The horror stood erect, rising to the height of a tall man, and it moved with the swaying of a great serpent, and its members undulated as if they were boneless. The round black head, having no visible ears or hair, was thrust foreward on a neck of snakish length. Two eyes, small and lidless, glowing hotly as coals from a wizard's brazier, were set low and near together in the noseless face above the serrate gleaming of bat-like teeth.

This much I saw, and no more, ere the thing went past me with the strange nimbus flaring from venomous green to a wrathful red. Of its actual shape, and the number of its limbs, I could form no just notion. It uttered no sound, and its motion was altogether silent. Running and slithering rapidly, it disappeared in the bough-black night, among the antique oaks; and I saw the hellish light no more.

I was nigh dead with fear when I reached the abbey and sought admittance at the postern. And the porter who came at last to admit me, after I had knocked many times, forbore to chide me for my tardiness when I told him of that which I had seen in the moonless wood.

On the morrow, I was called before Theophile, who rebuked me sternly for my breach of discipline, and imposed a penance of daylong solitude. Being forbidden to hold speech with the others, I did not hear till the second morn of the thing that was found before nones in the wood behind Perigon, where I had met the nameless beast.

The thing was a great stag which had been slain in some ungodly fashion, not by wolf or hunter or poacher. It was unmarked by any wound, other than a wide gash that had laid bare the spine from neck to tail; and the spine itself had been shattered and the white marrow sucked therefrom; but no other portion of the stag had been devoured. None could surmise the nature of the beast that slew and ravened in such a manner; but many, for the first time, began to credit my tale, which the abbot and the brothers had hitherto looked upon as a sort of drunken dream. Verily, they said, a creature from the Pit was abroad, and this creature had killed the stag and had sucked the marrow from its broken spine. And I, aghast with the recollection of that loathly vision, marvelled at the mercy of God, which had permitted me to escape the doom of the stag.

None other, it seemed, had beheld the monster on that occasion; for all the monks, save me, had been asleep in the dormitory; and Theophile had retired early to his cell. But, during the nights that followed the slaying of the stag, the presence of this baleful thing was made manifest to all.

Now, night by night, the comet greatened, burning like an evil mist of blood and fire, while the stars bleached before it and terror shadowed the thoughts of men. And in our prayers, from prime to evensong, we sought to deprecate the unknown ills which the comet would bring in its train. And day by day, from peasants, priests, woodcutters and others who came to visit the abbey, we heard the tale of fearsome and mysterious depredations, similar in all ways to the killing of the stag.

Dead wolves were found with their chins laid open and the spinal marrow gone; and an ox and a horse were treated in like fashion. Then, it would seem, the beast grew bolder — or else it wearied of such humble prey as deer and wolves, horses and oxen.

At first, it did not strike at living men, but assailed the helpless dead like some foul eater of carrion. Two freshly buried corpses were found lying in the cemetery at Ste. Zenobie, where the thing had dug them from their graves and had laid open their vertebrae. In each case, only a little of the marrow had been eaten; but as if in rage or disappointment, the cadavers had been torn into shreds from crown to heel, and the tatters of their flesh were mixed inextricably with the rags of their cerements. From this, it would seem that only the spinal marrow of creatures newly killed was pleasing to the monster.

Thereafter the dead were not molested; but a grievous toll was taken from the living. On the night following the desecration of the graves, two charcoal-burners, who plied their trade in the forest at a distance of no more than a mile from Perigon, were slain foully in their hut. Other charcoal-

burners, dwelling nearby, heard the shrill screams that fell to sudden silence; and peering fearfully through the chinks of their bolted doors, they saw anon in the grey starlight the departure of a black, obscenely glowing shape that issued from the hut. Not till dawn did they dare to verify the fate of their hapless fellows, who, they then discovered, had been served in the same manner as the wolves and other victims of the beast.

When the tale of this happening was brought to the abbey, Theophile called me before him and questioned me closely anent the apparition which I had encountered. He, like the others, had doubted me first, deeming that I was frightened by a shadow or by some furtive creature of the wood. But, after the series of atrocious maraudings, it was plain to all that a fiendish thing such as had never been fabled in Averroigne, was abroad and ravening through the summer woods. And moreover it was plain that this thing was the same which I had beheld on the eve of my return from Ste. Zenobie.

Our good abbot was greatly exercised over this evil, which had chosen to manifest itself in the neighborhood of the abbey, and whose depredations were all committed within a five-hours' journey of Perigon. Pale from his over-strict austerities and vigils, with hollow cheeks and burning eyes, Theophile called me before him and made me tell my story over and over, listening as one who flagellates himself for a fancied sin. And though I, like all others, was deeply sensible of this hellish horror and the scandal of its presence, I marvelled somewhat at the godly wrath and indignation of our abbot, in whom blazed a martial ardor against the minions of Asmodai. "Truly," he said, "there is a great devil among us, that has risen with the comet from Malebolge. We, the monks of Perigon, must go forth with cross and holy water to hunt the devil in its hidden lair, which lies haply at our very portals."

So, on the afternoon of that same day, Theophile, together with myself and six others chosen for their hardihood, sallied forth from the abbey and made search of the mighty forest for miles around, entering with lifted crosses, by torchlight, the deep caves to which we came, but finding no fiercer thing than wolf or badger. Also, we searched the vaults of the ruined castle of Faussesflammes, which is said to be haunted by vampires. But nowhere could we trace the sable monster, or find any sign of its lairing.

Since then, the middle summer has gone by with nightly deeds of terror, beneath the blasting of the comet. Beasts, men, children, women, have been done to death by the monster, which, though seeming to haunt mainly the environs of the abbey, has ranged afield even to the shores of the river Isoile and the gates of La Frênaie and Ximes. And some have beheld the monster at night, a black and slithering foulness clad in changeable luminescence; but no man has ever beheld it by day.

Thrice has the horror been seen in the woods behind the abbey; and once, by full moonlight, a brother peering from his window descried it in the abbey garden, as it glided between the rows of peas and turnips, going toward the forest. And all agree that the thing is silent, uttering no sound, and is swifter in its motion than the weaving viper.

Much have these occurrences preyed on our abbot, who keeps to his cell in unremitting prayer and vigil, and comes forth no longer, as was his wont, to dine and hold converse with the guests of the abbey. Pale and meager as a dying saint he grows, and a strange illness devours him as if with perpetual fever; and he mortifies the flesh till he totters with weakness. And we others, living in the fear of God, and abhorring the deeds of Satan, can only pray that the unknown scourge be lifted from the land, and pass with the passing of the comet.

[NOTE. Soon after the above deposition, Brother Gerome was found dead in his cell. His body was in the same condition, had been served in the same manner, as the other victims of the Beast.]

2. The Letter of Theophile to Sister Therèse

... To you, my sister in God as well as by consanguinity, I must ease my mind (if this be possible) by writing again of the dread thing that harbors close to Perigon: for this thing has struck once more within the abbey walls, coming in darkness and without sound or other ostent than the Phlegethonian luster that surrounds its body and members.

I have told you of the death of Brother Gerome, slain at evening, in his cell, while he was copying an Alexandrian manuscript. Now the fiend has become even bolder; for last night it entered the dormitory, where the brothers sleep in their robes, girded and ready to arise instantly. And without waking the others, on whom it must have cast a Lethean spell, it took Brother Augustin, slumbering on his pallet at the end of the row. And the fell deed was not discovered till daybreak, when the monk who slept nearest to Augustin awakened and saw his body, which lay face downward with the back of the robe and the flesh beneath a mass of bloody tatters.

On this occasion, the Beast was not beheld by anyone; but at other times, full often, it has been seen around the abbey; and its craftiness and hardihood are beyond belief, except as those of an arch-devil. And I know not where the horror will end; for exorcisms and the sprinkling of holy water at all doors and windows have failed to prevent the intrusion of the Beast; and God and Christ and all the holy Saints are deaf to our prayers.

Of the terror laid upon Averoine by this thing, and the bale and mischief it has wrought outside the abbey, I need not tell, since all this will have come to you as a matter of common report. But here, at Perigon, there is much that I would not have rumored publicly, lest the good fame of the abbey should suffer. I deem it an humiliating thing, and a derogation and pollution of our sanctity, that a foul fiend should have ingress to our halls unhindered and at will.

There are strange whispers among the brothers, who believe that Satan himself has risen to haunt us. Several have met the Beast even in the chapel, where it has left an unspeakably blasphemous sign of its presence. Bolts and locks are vain against it; and vain is the lifted cross to drive it away. It comes and goes at its own choosing; and they who behold it flee in irrestrainable terror. None knows where it will strike next; and there are those among the brothers who believe it menaces me, the elected abbot of Perigon; since many have seen it gliding along the hall outside my cell. And Brother Constantin, the cellarer, who returned late from a visit to Vyones not long ago, swears that he saw it by moonlight as it climbed the wall toward that window of my cell which faces the great forest. And seeing Constantin, the thing dropped to the ground like a huge ape and vanished among the trees.

All, it would seem, save me, have beheld the monster. And now, my sister, I must confess a strange thing, which above all else would attest the influential power of Hell in this matter, and the hovering of the wings of Asmodai about Perigon.

Each night, since the coming of the comet and the Beast, I have retired early to my cell, with the intention of spending the nocturnal hours in vigil and prayer, as I am universally believed to do. And each night a stupor falls upon me as I kneel before Christ on the silver crucifix; and oblivion steeps my senses in its poppy; and I lie without dreams on the cold floor till dawn. Of that which goes on in the abbey I know nothing; and all the brothers might be done to death by the Beast, and their spines broken and sucked as is its invariable fashion, without my knowledge.

Haircloth have I worn, and thorns and thistle-burs have I strewn on the floor, to awake me from this evil and ineluctable slumber that is like the working of some Orient drug. But the thorns and thistles are as a couch of

paradisaal ease, and I feel them not till dawn. And dim and confused are my senses when I awaken; and deep languor thralls my limbs. And day by day a lethal weakness grows upon me, which all ascribe to saintly pernoctations of prayer and austerity.

Surely I have become the victim of a spell, and am holden by a baleful enchantment while the Beast is abroad with its hellish doings. Heaven, in its inscrutable wisdom, punishing me for what sin I know not, has delivered me utterly to this bondage and has thrust me down the sloughs of a Stygian despair.

Ever I am haunted by an eerie notion, that the Beast comes nightly to earth from the red comet which passes like a fiery wain above Averroigne; and by day it returns to the comet, having eaten its fill of that provender for which it seeks. And only with the comet's fading will the horror cease to harry the land and infest Perigon. But I know not if this thought is madness, or a whisper from the Pit.

Pray for me, Therèse, in my bewitchment and my despair: for God has abandoned me, and the yoke of hell has somehow fallen upon me; and naught can I do to defend the abbey from this evil. And I, in turn, pray that such things may touch you not nor approach you in the quiet cloisters of the convent at Ximes ...

3. The Story of Luc le Chaudronnier

Old age, like a moth in some fading arras, will gnaw my memories oversoon, as it gnaws the memories of all men. Therefore I write this record of the true origin and slaying of that creature known as the Beast of Averoine. And when I have ended the writing, the record shall be sealed in a brazen box, and that box be set in a secret chamber of my house at Ximes, so that no man shall learn the dreadful verity of this matter till many years and decades have gone by. Indeed, it were not well for such evil prodigies to be divulged while any who took part in the happening are still on the earthward side of Purgatory. And at present the truth is known only to me and to certain others who are sworn to maintain secrecy.

The ravages of the Beast, however, are common knowledge, and have become a tale with which to frighten children. Men say that it slew fifty people, night by night, in the summer of 1369, devouring in each case the spinal marrow. It ranged mostly about the abbey of Perigon and to Ximes and Ste. Zenobie and La Franaie. Its nativity and lairing-place were mysteries that none could unravel; and church and state were alike powerless to curb its maraudings, so that a dire terror fell upon the land and people went to and fro as in the shadow of death.

From the very beginning, because of my own commerce with occult things and with the spirits of darkness, the baleful Beast was the subject of my concern. I knew that it was no creature of earth or of the terrene hells, but had come with the flaming comet from ulterior space; but regarding its character and attributes and genesis, I could learn no more at first than any other. Vainly I consulted the stars and made use of geomancy and necromancy; and the familiars whom I interrogated professed themselves

ignorant, saying that the Beast was altogether alien and beyond the ken of sublunar devils.

Then I bethought me of the ring of Eibon, which I had inherited from my fathers, who were also wizards. The ring had come down, it was said, from ancient Hyperborea; and it was made of a redder gold than any that the earth yields in latter cycles, and was set with a great purple gem, somber and smouldering, whose like is no longer to be found. And in the gem an antique demon was held captive, a spirit from pre-human worlds and ages, which would answer the interrogation of sorcerers.

So, from a rarely opened casket, I brought out the ring of Eibon and made such preparations as were needful for the questioning of the demon. And when the purple stone was held inverted above a small brazier filled with hotly burning amber, the demon made answer, speaking in a voice that was like the shrill singing of fire. It told me the origin of the Beast, which belonged to a race of stellar devils that had not visited the earth since the foundering of Atlantis; and it told me the attributes of the Beast, which, in its own proper form, was invisible and intangible to men, and could manifest itself only in a fashion supremely abominable. Moreover, it informed me of a method by which the Beast could be banished, if overtaken in a tangible shape. And even to me, the student of darkness [and evil], the revelations were a source of horror and surprise.

Musing on these dark matters, I waited among my books and braziers and alembics, for the stars had warned me that my intervention would be required in good time.

Toward the end of August, when the great comet was beginning to decline a little, there occurred the lamentable death of Sister Therèse, killed by the Beast in her cell at the Benedictine convent of Ximes. On this occasion, the Beast was plainly seen by late passers as it ran down the

convent wall by moonlight from a window; and others met it in the shadowy streets or watched it climb the city ramparts, running like a monstrous beetle or spider on the sheer stone as it fled from Ximes to regain its hidden lair.

To me, following the death of Therèse, there came privily the town marshal, together with a priest from the household of the Bishop of Ximes. And the two, albeit with palpable hesitation, begged my advice and assistance in the laying of the Beast.

“You, Messire le Chaudronnier,” they said, “are reputed to know the arcanic arts of sorcery, and the spells that summon or dismiss evil demons and other spirits. Therefore, in dealing with this devil, it may be that you shall succeed where all others have failed. Not willingly do we employ you in the matter, since it is not seemly for the church and the law to ally themselves with wizardry. But the need is desperate, lest the demon should take other victims; and in return for your aid, we can promise you a goodly reward of gold and a guarantee of lifelong immunity from all inquisition and prosecution which your doings might otherwise invite. The Bishop of Ximes, and the Archbishop of Vyonnes, are privy to this offer, which must remain secret.”

“I ask no reward,” I replied, “if it be in my power to rid Averroigne of this scourge. But you have set me a difficult task, and I must prepare myself for the undertaking, in which I shall require certain aid.”

“All assistance that we can give you shall be yours to command,” they said. “Men-at-arms shall attend you, if need be; and all doors shall be opened at your request. We have consulted Theophile, the abbot of Perigon, and the grief-smitten brother of the lately slain Therèse, who is most zealous for the laying of the fiend, and will admit you to the abbey. The horror seems to center thereabout, and two of the monks have been done to

death, and the abbot himself, it is rumored, has been haunted by the Beast. Therefore, it may be that you will wish to visit Perigon.”

I reflected briefly, and said:

“Go now, but send to me, an hour before sunset, two men-at-arms with horses and a third steed; and let the men be chosen for their valor and discretion: for this very night I shall visit the abbey.”

Now, when the priest and the marshal had gone, I spent several hours in making ready for my journey. It was necessary, above all other things, to compound a certain rare powder that had been recommended by the demon in the purple gem; for only by the casting of this powder could the Beast be driven away before its time. The ingredients of the powder were named in the Book of Eibon, that manual written by an old Hyper-borean wizard, who in his day had dealt with ultra-mundane spirits akin to the demon of the comet; and had also been the owner of the ring.

Having compounded the powder, I stored it in a bag of viper-skin. And soon after I had finished my preparations, the two men-at-arms and the horses came to my house, as had been stipulated.

The men were stout and tested warriors, clad in chain-mail, and carrying spears and swords. I mounted the third horse, a black and spirited mare, and we rode forth from Ximes toward Perigon, taking a direct and little-used way which ran for many miles through the werewolf-haunted forest.

My companions were taciturn, speaking only in brief answer to some question; and this pleased me, for I knew that they would maintain a discreet silence regarding that which might occur before dawn. Swiftly we rode, while the sun sank in a redness as of welling blood among the tall trees; and the darkness wove its thickening webs from bough to bough, closing upon us like some inextricable net of death and evil. Deeper we

went, into the brooding woods; and even I, the master of sorceries, trembled a little at the knowledge of all that was abroad in the darkness.

Undelayed and unmolested, however, we came to the abbey at late moonrise, when all the monks, except the aged porter, had retired to their dormitory. The porter, who had received word of our coming, would have admitted us; but this, as it happened, was no part of my plan. Saying I had reason to believe that the Beast would re-enter the abbey that very night, I told the porter my intention of waiting outside the walls to intercept it, and merely asked him to accompany us in a tour of the building's exterior, so that he could point out the various rooms. This he did, and during the course of the tour, he indicated a certain high window in the second story as being that of the abbot Theophile's chamber. The window faced the forest, and I remarked the abbot's rashness in leaving it open. This, the porter told me, was his invariable habit. Behind the window we could see the glimmering of a taper, as if the abbot were keeping late vigil.

We had committed our horses to the porter's care. After he had conducted us around the abbey and had left us, we returned to the space beneath Theophile's window and began our long watch in silence.

Pale and hollow as the face of a corpse, the moon rose higher, swimming above the somber oaks and pines, and pouring a spectral silver on the grey stone of the abbey walls. In the west the comet flared among the lusterless Signs, veiling the lifted sting of the Scorpion as it sank.

We waited hour by hour in the shortening shadow of a high pine, where none could see us from the abbey. When the moon had passed over, falling westward, the shadow began to lengthen toward the wall. All was mortally still, and we saw no movement, apart from the slow changing of the light and shade. Half-way between midnight and dawn, the taper went out in

Theophile's cell, as if it had burned to the socket; and thereafter the room remained dark.

Unquestioning, with ready spears, the two men-at-arms companioned me in that vigil. Well they knew the demonian terror which they might face before dawn; but there was no trace of trepidation in their bearing. And knowing much that they could not know, I held in my hands for instant use the bag of viper-skin that contained the Hyperborean powder.

The men stood nearer than I to the forest, facing it perpetually according to a strict order that I had given. But nothing stirred in the fretted gloom; and the skies grew paler, as if with morning twilight. Then, an hour before sunrise, when the shadow of the great pine had reached the wall and was climbing toward Theophile's window, there came the thing which I had anticipated. Very suddenly it came, and with no warning of its nearness, a horror of hellish red light, swift as a kindling, windblown flame, that leapt from the forest gloom and sprang upon us where we stood stiff and weary from our night-long vigil.

One of the men-at-arms was borne to the ground, and I saw above him, in a floating redness as of blood, the black and serpentine form of the Beast. A round and snakish head, without ears or nose, was tearing at the man's armor with sharp innumerable teeth, and I heard the teeth grate and clash on the linked iron as I stepped forward and flung the powder of Eibon at the Beast. The second man-at-arms, undaunted, would have assailed it with his spear, but this I forbade.

The floating powder, fine as a dust of mummia, seemed to dim the bloody light as it fell; and the Beast relinquished the fallen man, writhing away like a burnt serpent from the fire. Its members and body were loathfully convulsed; and the thing seemed to change horribly beneath our gaze, undergoing an incredible metamorphosis. Moment by moment it took

on the wavering similitude of man, like a werewolf that returns from his beasthood; and the red light grew dimmer, and the unclean blackness of its flesh appeared to flow and swirl, assuming the weft of cloth, and becoming the folds of a dark robe and cowl such as are worn by the Benedictines. Then, from the cowl, a face began to peer, glimmering pale and thin in the shadow; and the thing covered its face with sooty claws that were turning into hands, and shrank away from me as I pressed upon it, sprinkling it with the remainder of the powder.

Now I had driven it against the abbey wall; and there, with a wild, despairing cry that was half-human, half-demoniac, the thing turned from me and clawed frantically at the gray stone as if it would climb toward the abbot's window in that monstrous fashion that had been its wont. Almost, for a breath, it seemed to run upward, hanging to the wall like a bat or a great beetle. But the change had progressed too far, and it dropped back in the shadow of a pine, and tottering strangely as if with sudden mortal weakness, fell to the ground and lay huddled in its monkish garments like a black night-bird with broken vans.

The rays of the gibbous moon, sifting thinly through the boughs, lay cold and cadaverous on the dead face; though the body was immersed in shadow. And the face, even as I had expected, was that of the abbot Theophile, who had once been pointed out to me in Ximes. Already the peace of death was upon him; and horror had left no sign on the shut eyelids and the sealed lips; and there was no mark on the worn and haggard cheeks, other than that which might come from the saintly rigor of prolonged austerities.

The man-at-arms who had been struck down by the Beast was unharmed, though sorely bruised beneath his mail. He and his fellow stood beside me, saying naught; and I knew that they had recognized the dead abbot. So, while the moon grew grey with the nearness of dawn, I made them swear an

awful oath of secrecy, and enjoined them to bear faithful witness to the statement I must make before the monks of Perigon.

Then, having settled this matter, so that the good renown of the holy Theophile should rest unharmed, we aroused the porter and acquainted him with the abbot's lamentable death. And we told this story, averring that the Beast had come upon us unaware, and had gained the abbot's cell before we could prevent it, and had come forth again, carrying Theophile with its snakish members as if to bear him away to the sunken comet. Then, by means of a wizard powder, I had routed the unclean Beast, compelling it to relinquish its prey. And the thing had vanished in a cloud of sulphurous fire and vapor; but Theophile had died from the horror of his plight while the Beast was descending the wall. His death, I said, was a true martyrdom, and would not be in vain: the Beast would no longer plague the country or bedevil Perigon, since the use of Hyperborean powder was a sure exorcism.

This tale was accepted by the Brothers, who grieved mightily for their good abbot. Indeed, the tale was true enough in its fashion, for Theophile had been innocent and was wholly ignorant of the foul change that had come upon him nightly in his cell, and the deeds that were done by the Beast through his loathfully transfigured body. Each night the thing had come from the comet to assuage its hellish hunger; and being otherwise impalpable and powerless, it had used the abbot for its energumen, moulding his flesh in the image of some obscene monster from beyond the stars.

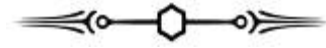
After Theophile's death, the Beast was seen no more in Averroigne; and the murderous deeds were not repeated. And in time the comet passed to other heavens, fading slowly; and the black terror it had wrought became a varying legend, even as all other bygone things. And they who read this record in future ages will believe it not, saying that no demon or malign

spirit could ever have prevailed upon true holiness. Indeed, it were well that none should believe the story: for strange abominations pass evermore between earth and moon and athwart the galaxies; and the gulf is haunted by that which it were madness for man to know. Unnameable things have come to us in alien horror, and shall come again. And the evil of the stars is not as the evil of earth.

The Letter from Mohaun Los

OR

Flight into Super-Time



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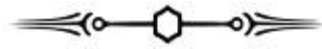
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CHAPTER I



SOME WHO READ this narrative will no doubt remember the disappearance of the eccentric millionaire Domitian Malgraff and his Chinese servant Li Wong, which provided the newspapers of 1940 with flamboyant headlines and many columns of rumor and speculation.

Reams were written concerning the case; but, stripped of all reportorial embellishments, it can hardly have been said to constitute a story. There were no verifiable motives nor explanatory circumstances, no clues nor traces of any kind. The two men had passed from all mundane knowledge, between one hour and the next, as if they had evaporated like some of the queer volatile chemicals with which Malgraff had been experimenting in his private laboratory. No one knew the use of these chemicals; and no one knew what had happened to Malgraff and Li Wong.

Few, perhaps, will consider that any reliable solution of these problems is now afforded through the publication of the manuscript received by Sylvia Talbot a year ago in the fall of 1941.

Miss Talbot had formerly been affianced to Malgraff, but had broken off the engagement three years prior to his disappearance. She had been fond of him; but his dreamy disposition and impractical leanings had formed a decided barrier from her viewpoint. The youth had seemed to take his dismissal lightly and had afterwards plunged into scientific researches whose nature and object he confided to no one. But neither then nor at any other time had he shown the least inclination to supplement by his own efforts the huge fortune inherited from his father.

Regarding his vanishment, Miss Talbot was as much in the dark as everyone else. After the breaking-off of the engagement she had continued to hear from him at intervals; but his letters had grown more and more infrequent through his absorption in unnamed studies and labors. She was both surprised and shocked by the news of his disappearance.

A world-wide search was made by his lawyers and relations; but without result. Then, in the late summer of 1941, the strange vessel containing the aforesaid manuscript was found floating in the Banda Sea, between Celebes and the Spice Islands, by a Dutch pearler.

The vessel was a sphere of some unknown crystalline substance, with flattened ends. It was eighteen inches in diameter and possessed an interior mechanism of miniature dynamos and induction coils, all of the same clear material, together with an apparatus resembling an hour-glass, which was half-filled with a grey powder. The outer surface was studded with several tiny knobs. In the very center, in a small cylindrical compartment, was a thick roll of greenish-yellow paper on which the name and address of Miss Sylvia Talbot were plainly legible through the various layers of the sphere. The writing had been done with some sort of brush or an extremely heavy pen, in pigment of a rare shade of purple.

Two months later, the thing reached Miss Talbot, who was startled and amazed when she recognized the writing as that of Domitian Malgraff.

After many vain experiments, by manipulating certain of the exterior knobs, the vessel was opened; and it came apart in two hemispheric sections. Miss Talbot found that the roll of paper contained a voluminous letter from Malgraff, written on yard-long sheets. This letter, with the omission of a few intimate paragraphs and sentences, is now offered to the public in obedience to the writer's wish.

Malgraff's incredible tale, of course, is easily enough to be explained on the ground of imaginative fabrication. Such, in the opinion of those who knew him, would be far from incompatible with his character. In his own whimsical and fantastic way, he is said to have been something of a joker. A new search has now been instituted, on the supposition that he may be living somewhere in the Orient; and all the isles adjacent to the Banda Sea will be carefully examined.

However, certain collateral details are somewhat mysterious and baffling. The material and mechanism of the sphere are unfamiliar to scientists, and are still unexplained; and the fabric on which the letter was written, as well as the pigment used, have so far defied analysis. The paper, in its chemical composition, seems to present affinities with both vellum and papyrus; and the pigment has no terrestrial analogue.

THE LETTER

Dear Sylvia:

You have always considered me a hopeless dreamer; and I am the last person who would endeavor or even wish to dispute your summary. It might be added that I am one of those dreamers who have not been able to content themselves with dreams. Such persons, as a rule, are unfortunate and unhappy, since few of them are capable of realizing, or even approximating, their visionary conceptions.

In my case, the attempted realization has led to a singular result: I am writing this letter from a world that lies far-off in the two-fold labyrinth of time and space; a world removed by many million years from the one wherein you live, the one whereto I am native.

As you know, I have never cared greatly for the material things of earth. I have always been irked by the present age, have always been devoured by

a sort of nostalgia for other times and places. It has seemed so oddly and capriciously arbitrary that I should be *here* and not *otherwise*, in the infinite, eternal ranges of being; and I have long wondered if it would not be possible to gain control of the laws that determine our temporal or cosmic situation, and pass at will from world to world or from cycle to cycle.

It was after you dismissed me that my speculations along such lines began to take a practical turn. You had told me that my dreamings were no less impossible than useless. Perhaps, among other things, I desired to prove that they were not impossible. Their utility or inutility was not a problem that concerned me, nor one which any man could decide.

I shall not weary you with a full recountal of my labors and researches. I sought above all else to invent a machine by which I could travel in time, could penetrate the past or the future. I started from the theory that movement in the time-dimension could be controlled, accelerated or reversed by the action of some special force. By virtue of such regulation, one would be able to move forward or backward along the æons.

I shall say only that I succeeded in isolating the theoretic time-force, though without learning its ultimate nature and origin. It is an all-pervading energy, with a shorter wavelength than that of the cosmic rays. Then I invented a compound metal, perfectly transparent and of great toughness, which was peculiarly fitted for use in conducting and concentrating the force.

From this metal I constructed my machine, with dynamos in which I could develop an almost illimitable power. The reversal of the force, compelling a retrograde movement in time, could be secured by passing the current through certain rare volatile chemicals imprisoned in a special device resembling a large hour-glass.

After many months of arduous effort, the mechanism stood completed on the floor of my Chicago laboratory. Its outward form was more or less spherical, with flattened ends like those of a Chinese orange. It was capable of being hermetically sealed, and the machinery included an oxygen-apparatus. Within, there was ample room for three people amid the great tubular dynamos, the array of chronometric dials, and the board of regulative levers and switches. All the parts, being made of the same material, were transparent as glass.

Though I have never loved machinery, I surveyed it with a certain pride. There was a delightful irony in the thought that by using this super-mechanical device I could escape from the machine-ridden era in which I had been born.

My first intention was to explore the future. By travelling far enough in forward time, I expected to find one of two things: men would either have learned to discard their cumbrous and complicated engines, or would have been destroyed by them, giving place to some other and more sensible species in the course of mundane evolution.

However, if the human future failed to inveigle me in any of its phases, I could reverse the working of the time-force and go back into the æons that were posterior to my own epoch. In these, unless history and fable had lied, the conditions of life would be more congenial to my own tastes. But my most urgent curiosity was concerning the unknown and problematic years of ages to come.

All my labors had been carried on in private, with no other aid than that of Li Wong, my Chinese cook, valet and housekeeper. And at first I did not confide the purpose of the mechanism even to Li Wong, though I knew him to be the most discreet and intelligent of mortals. People in general would have laughed if they had known what I was trying to do. Also there were

cousins and other relations, all enviously watchful of my inherited wealth ... and a country full of lawyers, alienists and lunatic asylums. I have always had a reputation for eccentricity; and I did not choose to give my dear relatives an opportunity which might have been considered legally sufficient for the well-known process of “railroading.”

I had fully intended to take the time-voyage alone. But when I had finished building the machine, and all was in readiness for departure, I realized that it would be impossible to go without my factotum, Li Wong. Apart from his usefulness and trustworthiness, the little Chinaman was good company. He was something of a scholar in his own tongue, and did not belong to the coolie class. Though his mastery of English was still imperfect, and my knowledge of Chinese altogether rudimentary, we had often discussed the poetry and philosophy of his own land, as well as certain less erudite topics.

Li Wong received the announcement of our projected journey with the same blandness and aplomb which he would have shown if I had told him we were going into the next state.

“Me go pack,” he said. “You want plentee shirt?”

Our preparations were soon made. Apart from the changes of raiment suggested by Li Wong, we took with us a ten days’ supply of provisions, a medicine kit, and a bottle of brandy, all of which were stored in lockers I had built for the purpose. Not knowing what we might find, or what might happen by the way, it was well to be prepared for emergencies.

All was now ready. I locked Li Wong and myself within the time-sphere, and then sat down before the instrument-board on which the controlling levers were ranged. I felt the thrill of a new Columbus or a Magellan, about to sail for undiscovered continents. Compared with this, all former human explorations would be as the crawling of emmets and pismires.

Even in the exultation of that moment, though everything had been calculated with mathematical precision, had been worked out to an algebraic degree, I recognized the element of uncertainty and danger. The effect of time-travelling on the human constitution was an unknown quantity. Neither of us might survive the process of acceleration in which lustrums and decades and centuries would be reduced to mere seconds.

I pointed this out to Li Wong. "Maybe you had better stay behind after all," I suggested.

He shook his head vigorously. "You go, I go," he said with an imperturbable smile.

Making a mental note of the hour, day and minute of our departure, I pulled a lever and turned on the accelerative force.

I had hardly known what to anticipate in the way of physical reactions and sensations. Among other contingencies, it had even occurred to me that I might become partially or wholly unconscious; and I had clamped myself to the seat to avoid falling in case of this.

However, the real effect was very strange and unforeseen. My first feeling was that of sudden bodily lightness and immateriality. At the same time, the machine seemed to have expanded, its walls, dynamos and other portions were a dim and shining blur, and appeared to repeat themselves in an endless succession of momentary images. My own person, and that of Li Wong, were multiplied in the same manner. I was indescribably conscious of myself as a mere flickering shadow, from which was projected a series of other shadows. I tried to speak, and the words became an indefinitely repeated echo.

For a brief interval the sphere seemed to be hanging in a sea of light. Then, incomprehensibly, it began to darken. A great blackness pressed upon it from without; but the outlines of everything within the sphere were still

visible through a sort of luminosity that clung to them like a feeble phosphorescence.

I was puzzled by these phenomena and, in particular, by the outside darkness, for which I could not account. Theoretically, the days and night through which we were passing at such supreme velocity would merge in a sort of greyness.

Centuries, æons, *kalpas* of time, were going by in the strange night. Then, mysterious as the darkness, there came a sudden, blinding glare of light, intenser than anything I had yet known which pervaded the sphere, and died away like a lightning-flash. It was followed shortly by two lesser flashes, very close together; and then the outer gloom returned once more.

I reached out, with a hand that became a hundred hands, and succeeded somehow in turning on the light that hung above my instrument board and chronometric dials. One of these dials was designed to register my forward motion in time. It was hard to distinguish the real hands and figures in the ghostly blur by which they were surrounded; but somehow, after much poring, I found that I had gone onward into the future for no less than twenty thousand years!

Surely this would be enough, at least for the initial stage of my flight. I groped for the levers, and turned off the accelerative power.

Instantly my visual sensations became those of a normal three-dimensional being in normal time and space. But the feeling of lightness and immateriality still persisted. It seemed to me that I should have floated in mid-air like a feather, if it had not been for the metal clamps that held me to the seat.

I heard the voice of Li Wong, whom I had practically forgotten for the moment. The voice came from above! Startled, I saw that the Chinese, with his wide sleeves flapping ludicrously, had floated upward and was bobbing

about in the air, trying vainly to recover his equilibrium and re-establish his feet on the floor!

“Me fly all same sea-gull,” he tittered, seeming to be amused rather than frightened by his novel predicament.

What on earth had happened? Was the force of gravity non-existent in this future world? I peered out through the glassy walls, trying to determine the geographical features of the terrain in which we had landed.

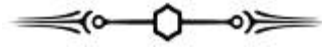
It must be night, I thought, for all was darkness, shot with a million cold and piercing stars. But why were the stars all around us, as well as above? Even if we were on a mountain-top, we should be surrounded by the vague masses of remote nocturnal horizons.

But there were no horizons anywhere — only the swarming lights of irre recognizable constellations. With growing bewilderment, I looked down at the crystalline floor, and beneath me, as in some awful gulf, there swam the icy fires of unknown galaxies! I saw, with a terrific mental shock, that we were suspended in mid-space.

My first thought was that the earth and the solar system had been annihilated. Somewhile during the past twenty thousand years, there had been a cosmic cataclysm; and Li Wong and myself, moving at inconceivable speed in the abstract time-dimension, had somehow managed to escape it.

CHAPTER II

A Bizarre World



Then, like a thunderclap, there came the realization of the truth. *The sphere had moved only in time*; but, in the interim, the earth and the sun had been travelling away from us in space, even as all stellar and planetary bodies are said to travel. I had never dreamt of such a contingency in all my calculations, thinking that the laws of gravitation would keep us automatically in the same position relative to the earth itself at which we had started. But evidently these laws were non-effective in the ultra-spatial dimension known as time. We had stood still in regard to ordinary space, and were now separated from the earth by twenty thousand years of cosmic drift! Considered as a time-machine, my invention was a pretty fair vehicle for instellar transit.

To say that I was dumfounded would only prove the inadequacy of human words. The feeling that surged upon me was the most utter and abominable panic that I have ever experienced. The sensations of an explorer lost without a compass amid the eternal, unhorizoned ice of some Arctic desert would have been mild and infantile in comparison. Never before had I understood the true awfulness of inter-sidereal depth and distance, of the gulf wherein there is neither limitation nor direction. I seemed to whirl like a lost mote on the winds of immeasurable chaos, in a vertigo of the spirit as well as of the body.

I reached out for the lever that would reverse the time-energy and send the sphere backward to its starting-point. Then, in the midst of all my panic, of all my violent fear and topsy-turvy confusion, I felt a reluctance to

return. Even in the bleak abyss that yawns unbridgeable between the stars, I was not allured by the thought of the stale and commonplace world I had left.

I began to recover something of stability, of mental equipoise. I remembered the bright flashes that had puzzled me. These, I now realized, had marked the passage of an alien sun and planetary system, coinciding in its orbit with the former position of the earth in space. If I went on in abstract time, other bodies would doubtless occupy the same position, in the everlasting drift of the universe. By slowing the movement of the sphere, it might be feasible to land on one of them.

To you, no doubt the sheer folly and madness of such a project will be more than obvious. Indeed, I must have been a little mad, from the physical and psychic strain of my unparalleled experience. Otherwise, the difficulties of the landing which I so coolly proposed to myself — not to mention the dangers — would have been glaringly manifest.

I resumed the time-flight, at a speed reduced by half. This, I calculated, would enable me to sight the next approaching orb in time to prepare for landing.

The darkness about us was unbroken for an interval of many ages. It seemed to me that eternity itself had gone by in the rayless void, ere a brilliant glare of light betokened a nearing sun. It passed us very close, filling half the heavens for an instant. Apparently there were no planets — or, at least none that came within sight.

Steadily we went on in time; till I ceased to watch the dial with its blurred and multiplied ciphers. I lived only in a dream of unreal and spectral duration. But somehow, after awhile, I knew that more than a million years had been traveled by the sphere.

Then, suddenly, another solar orb swam up before us. We must have passed through it, for the sphere was briefly surrounded by an incandescent flame, that seemed as if it would annihilate us with its intolerable flare. Then we were out of it, were suspended in black space, and a smaller, gleaming body was hurtling toward us.

This, I knew, would be a planet. I slowed the sphere to a rate of speed that would permit me to examine it. The thing loomed upon us, it whirled beneath us in a riot of massed images. I thought that I could distinguish seas and continents, isles and mountains. It rose still nearer, and appeared to surround us with swirling forms that were suggestive of enormous vegetable growths.

My hand was poised in readiness on the lever that would terminate our flight. As we swung dizzily amid the swirling forest, I brought the machine to a full stop, no doubt risking an instant destruction. I heard a violent crash, and the vessel rocked and reeled deliriously. Then it seemed to right itself, and stood still. It was lurching half to one side, and I had nearly been wrenched from my seat, while Li Wong was sprawling in an undignified position on the floor. But nevertheless, we had landed!

Still giddy, and trying to regain my equilibrium, I peered through the crystalline walls on a weird and exuberant tangle of bewildering plant-forms. The time-machine was lodged between the swollen, liver-colored boles of certain of these plants and was hanging four or five feet in air above a pink and marshy soil from which protruded like sinister horns the brownish-purple tips of unknown growths.

Overhead, there were huge, pale, flabby leaves with violet veinings in which I seemed to detect the arterial throb of sluggish pulses. The leaves depended from the bulbous top of each plant like a circle of flattened arms from a headless torso.

There were other vegetable forms, all crowding and looming grotesquely in the green, vaporous air whose density was such as to give almost the appearance of a submarine garden to the odd scene. From every side I received a confused impression of python-like rattans, of poddy, fulsome, coral-tinted fronds and white or vermilion fungoid blossoms large as firkins. Above the jungle-tops, an olive-golden glimmering in the thick atmosphere betokened the meridian rays of a muffled sun.

My first feelings were those of astonishment — the scene before me was a source of giddiness to eye and brain. Then, as I began to distinguish new details in the medley of towering, outlandish shapes, I conceived a super-added emotion of horror, of veritable disgust.

At intervals there were certain immense, bowl-like flowers, supported on strong, hispid stems of a curious tripodal sort, and hued with the ghastly greens and purples of putrefying flesh. In these bowls the squat bulks of mammoth insects — or, rather, of what I took to be such at the moment — were crouching in an evil immobility with strange antennæ and other organs or members hanging down over the rims of the bowls.

These monsters appeared to mock the cadaverous coloring of the flowers. They were inexpressibly loathsome, and I shall not endeavor to describe their anatomy with any degree of minuteness. I shall, however, mention the three snail-like horns, ending in ruby-red eyes, that rose above their bodies and watched the forest around them with a baleful vigilance.

About the base of each of the tripodal stems, I perceived the carcasses of quaint animals, lying in a circle, in varying stages of decomposition. From many of these carrion, new plants of the same type as the bowl-flowers were issuing, with dark, ghoulish buds that had not yet unfolded.

As I studied these plants and their guardians with growing repulsion, a six-legged creature, something between a wart-hog and an iguana, emerged

from the jungle and trotted past within a dozen feet of the time-sphere. It approached one of the bowl-shaped blossoms, and sniffed at the hairy triple stem with a thin ant-eater snout. Then, to my horror, the squatting form in the bowl sprang forth with lightning rapidity and landed on the spine of the hapless animal. I saw the flash of a knife-like sting that was buried in the grotesque body. The victim struggled feebly, and then lay supine, while its assailant proceeded to make use of an organ that resembled the ovipositor of the ichneumon-fly.

All this was highly revolting; and even more repulsive was my discovery that the insect-form was actually a part of the flower in which it had been reposing! It hung by a long, pallid, snaky rope, like a sort of umbilical cord, from the center of the tilted bowl; and after the hideous thing had finished with its victim, the cord began to shorten, drawing the monster back to its lurking-place. There it squatted as before, watching for fresh prey with its ruby eyes. It was damnably obvious that the plant belonged to a semi-faunal genus and was wont to deposit its seeds (or eggs) in animal bodies.

I turned to Li Wong, who was surveying the scene with manifest disapprobation in his almond eyes.

“Me no likee this.” He shook his head gravely as he spoke.

“Can’t say that I care much for it, either,” I returned. “Considered as a landing-place, this particular planet leaves a good deal to be desired. I fear we’ll have to go on for a few more million or trillion years, and try our luck elsewhere.”

I peered out once more, wondering if the other plant-types around us were all possessed of some disagreeable and aggressive character or ability, like the bowl-flowers. I was not reassured when I noticed that some of the serpentine rattans were swaying sluggishly toward the time-sphere, and that

one of them had already reached it and was creeping along the wall with tiny tendrils that ended in suction-cups.

Then, from amid the curling vapors and crowding growths, a bizarre being appeared and ran toward the time-machine, barely avoiding one of the cord-suspended monsters as it launched itself from a tall blossom. The thing fell short of its intended prey by a mere inch or two, and swung horribly in mid-air like a goblin pendulum before it was retracted by the long, elastic cord.

The aforesaid being was about the height of an average man. He was bipedal, but exhibited four arms, two of which issued from either side of his elongated, pillar-like neck and the other two from positions half-way down on his wasp-waisted thorax. His facial features were of elfin delicacy, and a high, fluted comb of ivory rose from his broad and hairless crown.

His nose, or what appeared to be such, was equipped with mobile feelers that hung down beside his tiny puckered mouth like Oriental mustaches; and his round, discoid ears were furnished with fluttering, streamer-like diaphanous membranes, thin as strips of parchment, on which were curious hieroglyphic markings.

His small, sapphire-brilliant eyes were set far apart beneath ebon semi-circles that seemed to have been drawn with pigment on his pearly skin. A short cape of some flossy vermillion fabric served to cover his upper body; but, apart from this, there was nothing that one could distinguish as artificial raiment.

Avoiding several more of the plant-monsters, who lunged viciously, he neared the time-machine. Plainly he had seen us; and it seemed to me that his sapphire eyes implored us for succor and refuge.

I pressed a button which served to unlock and open the door of the sphere. As the door swung outward, Li Wong and I were assailed by

numerous unearthly smells, many of which were far from pleasant. We breathed the surge of an air that was heavy with oxygen and was also laden with the vapors of unfamiliar chemical elements.

With a long, flying leap, the strange entity sprang in air and gained the crystal sill of the open machine. I caught the flexible three-fingered hands of his lower arms and drew him to safety. Then I closed the door, just as one of the cord-hung monsters hurtled against it, breaking its keen, steely-looking sting and staining the clear metal with a rill of amber-yellow venom.

“Welcome, stranger,” I said.

Our guest was breathing heavily; and his facial feelers trembled and swayed with the palpitation of his fine, membranous nostrils. Apparently he was too breathless for speech; but he made a series of profound inclinations with his crested head, and moved his tenuous fingers with fluttering gestures that were somehow expressive of regard and gratitude.

When he had recovered his breath, and had composed himself a little, he began to talk in a voice of unearthly pitch, with sharp cadences and slowly rising intonations which I can compare only to the notes of certain tropic birds. Of course, Li Wong and I could only guess at his meaning, since the words, wherever distinguishable as such, were totally different from those of any human tongue or dialect.

We surmised, however, that he was thanking us and was also offering us an explanation of the perils from which we had rescued him. He seemed to be telling us a lengthy tale, accompanied with many dramatic gestures of an odd but eloquent sort. From certain of these, we gathered that his presence in that evil jungle was involuntary; that he had been abandoned there by enemies, in the hope that he would never escape from the wilderness of monstrous plants.

By signs, he told us that the jungle was of enormous extent, and was filled with growths that were even more dreadful than the bowl-flowers.

Afterwards, when we had learned to understand the language of this quaint being, we found that our surmises had been correct; but the narrative, in its entirety, was even stranger and more fantastical than we had imagined.

As I listened to our guest, and watched the swiftly weaving movements of his four hands, I became aware that a shadow had fallen upon us, intercepting the green, watery light of the blurred heavens. Looking up, I saw that a small air-vessel, of discoid form, surrounded with turning wheels and pointed wings that whirled like the sails of a windmill, was descending toward us and was hovering just above the time-machine.

Our guest perceived it also, and broke off abruptly in his story-telling. I could see that he was greatly alarmed and agitated. I inferred that the air-vessel belonged, perhaps, to his enemies, to the very beings who had left him to a cruel doom in that fearsome terrain. No doubt they had returned to make sure of his fate; or else their attention had in some manner been attracted by the appearance of the time-sphere.

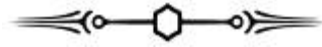
The alien ship was now hanging near the tops of the giant plants between whose boles the sphere had become lodged in landing. Through the silvery whirl of its wings and rotating wheels, I saw the faces of several entities who bore a general likeness to our guest, and were plainly of the same racial type. One of these beings was holding a many-mouthed instrument with a far-off resemblance to the Gatling gun, or mitrailleuse, and was aiming it at the time-machine.

Our passenger gave a piercing cry, and clutched my arm with two of his hands while he pointed upward with the others. I required no interpreter, and no lengthy process of reasoning, to understand that we were in grave danger from the foreign vessel and its occupants. I sprang immediately to

the instrument board, and released the lever that would send us onward in time at the utmost speed of which the machine was capable.

CHAPTER III

The Flight Through Time



Even as I pulled the lever, there came from the ship a flash of cold and violescent light that seemed to envelop the time-sphere. Then all things in the world without were resolved into a flying riot of formless, evanescent images, and around us once more, after a brief interval, was the ebon darkness of interstellar space. Again the ship was filled with momentary, repeated phantoms, to which were added those of our curious guest. Again the dials, the levers and the dynamos multiplied themselves in a dim, phosphorescent glow.

Later, I learned that our flight into forward æons had saved us from utter annihilation only by the fraction of a second. The force emitted by the many-mouthed weapon on the air-vessel would have turned the sphere into vanishing vapor if we had sustained it for more than a moment.

Somehow, I managed to clamp myself into the seat once more, and sat watching the weirdly manifolded hands and ciphers that registered our progress in universal time. Fifty thousand years — a hundred thousand — a million — and still we floated alone in the awesome gulf of the everlasting cosmic midnight. If any suns or planets had passed us during the interim, they had gone by at a distance which rendered them invisible.

Li Wong and the new passenger had clutched at the handles of the lockers in which our provisions were stored, to keep themselves from drifting aimlessly about in mid-air. I heard the babble of their voices, whose every tone and syllable was subdivided into a million echoes.

A peculiar faintness came upon me, and a dream-like sense of the unreal and irrational attached itself to all my impressions and ideas. I seemed to have gone beyond all that was conceivable or comprehensible, to have overpassed the very boundaries of creation. The black chaos in which I wandered was infinitely lost from all direction and orientation, was beyond life itself or the memory of life; and my consciousness seemed to flicker and drown in the dark nullitude of an incommensurable void.

Still we went on along the ages. On the far-off, receding earth, as well as on other planets, whole civilizations had evolved and elapsed and been forgotten, and many historical epochs and geological eras had gone by. Moons and worlds and even great suns had been destroyed. Travelling down their eternal orbits, the very constellations had all shifted their stances amid the infinite. These were inconceivable thoughts; and my brain was overwhelmed by the mere effort to visualize and comprehend their awfulness.

Strangest of all was the thought that the world I had known was lost not only in sidereal immensity, but in the rayless night of a remote antiquity!

With more than the longing of a derelict sailor, adrift on chartless seas, I desired to feel underfoot once more the stable soil of *terra firma* — no matter where, or what. We had already made one landing in the dizzy labyrinth of time and space; and somewhere, somehow, among the æons through which we were passing, another cosmic body might offer itself, intersecting in its spatial path our own position in abstract time.

Again, as before our initial landing, I slowed our progress to a rate that would allow inspection of any sun or world we might happen to approach.

There was a long, dreary interval of waiting, in which it seemed that the whole universe, with all its systems and galaxies, must have gone by us and left us hanging alone in the void that lies beyond organized matter. Then I

became aware of a growing light; and, retarding the time-machine still further, I saw that a planet was nearing us; and beyond the planet were two larger fiery bodies that I took for a binary system of ours.

Now was our opportunity, and I determined to seize it. The new planet whirled beneath us, it rolled upon us amain, as we still moved in time at a rate whereby whole days were reduced to minutes. A moment more, and it rose from the gulf like some gigantically swelling bubble to surround us with a maze of half-cognizable imageries. There were Atlantean mountaintops through which we seemed to pass, and seas or level deserts above which we appeared to hover in the midst of broken cloud-strata. Now, for an instant, we were among buildings, or what I assumed to be such; then we were hurled onward to a broad, open space. I caught a confused glittering of many-pointed lights and unidentifiable, thronging forms, as I reached out and brought the sphere to a sudden halt.

As I have said before, it was a perilous thing to stop thus in accelerated time above a moving planet. There might well have been a collision that would have destroyed the machines; or we might have found ourselves embedded beneath fathoms of soil or stones. Indeed, there were any number of undesirable possibilities; and the only wonder is that we escaped annihilation.

As it was, we must have come to a halt in mid-air, perhaps fifteen or twenty feet above the ground. Of course, we were seized immediately by the gravitational influence of the new world. Even as my sense-impressions cleared with the cessation of the time-flight, we fell with a terrible, ear-splitting crash, and the sphere almost seemed to rebound and then rolled over, careening on its side. I was torn from my seat by the shock of impact, and Li Wong and our passenger were hurled to the floor beside me. The

stranger and myself, though sorely bruised and shaken, contrived to retain consciousness; but I saw that Li Wong had been stunned by the fall.

Giddily, with swaying limbs and reeling senses, I tried to stand up, and somehow succeeded. My first thought was for Li Wong, who was lying inert against the tilted dynamos. A hasty examination showed me that he was uninjured. My second thought was for the time-machine, whose tough metal revealed no visible damage. Then, inevitably, the world into which we had fallen in a manner so precipitate was forced upon my attention.

We had come down in the very center of what appeared to be an active battle-field! All around us was a formidable array of chariot-like vehicles, high-wheeled and high-bodied, drawn by quaint monsters that recalled the dragons of heraldry, and driven by beings of an unearthly kind who were little more than pygmies.

There were many foot soldiers, too, and all were armed with weapons such as have never been used in human history. There were spears that ended in curving, saw-toothed blades, and swords whose hilts were in the middle, and spiked balls at the end of long, leathern thongs, which were hurled at the enemy and then drawn back by their owners. Also, each of the chariots was fitted with a catapult, from which similar balls were flung.

The users of these weapons had paused in the midst of what was plainly a ferocious battle, and were all staring at the time-machine. Some, I saw, had been crushed beneath the heavy sphere as it plunged among them. Others had drawn back, and were eyeing us doubtfully.

Even as I surveyed this singular scene, with bewilderment that permitted no more than a partial cognizance of its baffling details, I saw that the interrupted combat was being resumed. The monster-drawn chariots swayed back and forth, and the air was thick with flying missiles, some of which hurtled against the walls of the sphere. It seemed, perhaps, that our presence

was having an effect on the morale of these fantastic warriors. Many of us who were nearest to the sphere began to retreat, while others pressed forward; and I was able for the first time to distinguish the members of the two factions, who obviously belonged to different races.

Those of one faction, who were all foot-soldiers armed with spears and swords, were seemingly a rude barbaric type. They outnumbered the others greatly. Their fearsome, uncouth features were like graven masks of fury and malignity; and they fought with a savage desperation.

Their opponents, who comprised all the chariot-drivers, as well as a smaller body of foot-soldiers, were more delicate and civilized in appearance, with slighter limbs and anatomies. They made a skillful use of their catapults; and the tide of the battle seemed to be turning in their favor. When I perceived that all those who had been struck down by the time-machine belonged to the more barbarous type, I inferred that possibly our apparition had been construed as favorable to one faction and inimical to the other. The catapult-users were gaining courage; and the spear and sword bearers were becoming visibly demoralized.

The combat turned to an ever-growing rout. The corps of chariots gathered in a crushing mass about the time-sphere and drove the enemy swiftly back, while, in the heat of conflict, a barrage of singular weapons continued to assail our hyaline walls.

Ferocious-looking as they were, the dragons seemed to take no active part in the struggle, and were plainly mere beasts of draught or burden. But the slaughter was terrific; and crushed or trodden bodies were lying everywhere. The role of *deus ex machina* which I appeared to be playing in this outlandish battle was not one that I should have chosen of my own accord; and I soon decided that it would be better to fare even further afield in universal time.

I pulled the starting-lever; but, to my confoundment and consternation, there was no result. The mechanism in some manner had been jarred or disconnected by the violence of our fall, though I could not locate the precise difficulty at that moment. Afterwards, I found that the connection between the instrument-board and the dynamos had been broken, thus rendering the force inoperative.

Li Wong had now recovered consciousness. Rubbing his head, he sat up and appeared to be pondering our remarkable *milieu* with all the gravity of an Oriental philosopher. Our passenger was peering out with his brilliant sapphire eyes on this world to which he was no less alien than Li Wong and myself. He seemed to be eyeing the odd warriors and their dragon-teams with a cool, scientific interest.

The more civilized of the two factions was now driving its enemies from the field in a tide of carnage. Our sound-proof walls prevented us from hearing the crash and rumble of chariot-wheels, the clangor of clashing weapons, and the cries that were doubtless being emitted by the warriors.

Since nothing could be done at the moment to repair our machinery, I resigned myself, not without misgivings, to an indefinite sojourn in the world whereon we had landed so fortuitously.

In perhaps ten minutes the raging battle was over, the unslain remnant of the barbarians was in full flight, and the conquerors, who had poured past us in an irresistible torrent, were returning and massing about the sphere at a little distance.

Several, whom I took for commanding officers, descended from their cars and approached us. They prostrated themselves before the machine in the universal posture of reverence.

For the first time, I was able to form an exact impression of the appearance of these beings. The tallest of them was barely four feet in

height, and their limbs, which were normal in number according to human ideas, were slender as those of elves or leprechauns. Their movements were very swift and graceful, and were seemingly aided by a pair of small wings or erigible membranes attached to their sloping shoulders.

Their faces were marked by a most elaborate development of the nostrils and eyes; and the ears and mouths were little more than vestigial by contrast. The nasal apparatus was convoluted like that of certain bats, with mobile valves arranged in rosettes, and a nether appendage that recalled the petals of a butterfly orchid. The eyes were proportionately enormous and were set obliquely.

They were furnished with vertical lids and possessed a power of semicircular rotation and also of protrusion and retraction in their deep orbits. This power, we learned later, enabled them to magnify or reduce any visual image at will, and also to alter or invert the perspective in which it was seen.

These peculiar beings were equipped with body-armor of red metal marked off in ovoid scales. Their light-brown arms and legs were bare. Somehow their whole aspect was very gentle and un-warlike. I marvelled at the prowess and bravery which they had shown in the late battle.

They continued their obeisances before the time-machine, rising and prostrating themselves anew, in an alternation like a set ritual with gestures and genuflections of hieratic significance. I conceived the idea that they regarded the machine itself as a conscious, intelligent and perhaps supernal entity; and that we the occupants, if perceived at all, were considered as internal and integral parts of the mechanism.

Li Wong and I began to debate the advisability of opening the door and revealing ourselves to these fantastic devotees. Unluckily, I had neglected to provide the sphere with any device for determining the chemical

composition of other-world atmospheres; and I was not sure that the outside air would prove wholly suitable for human respiration. It was this consideration, rather than any actual fear of the mild, quaint warriors, that caused me to hesitate.

I decided to defer our epiphany; and I was about to resume my examination of the deranged machinery, when I noticed an ebullition in the massed ranks of soldiers that were drawn up around us at some little distance. The ranks parted with a swift, flowing motion, leaving a wide lane through which, presently, a remarkable vehicle advanced.

The vehicle was a sort of open platform mounted on numerous low, squat wheels, and drawn by a dozen of the dragon-creatures, arranged in teams of four. The platform was rectangular, and the small, castor-like wheels served to elevate it little more than a foot above the ground. I could not determine its material, which was copperish in color and suggested a heavily metallic stone rather than a pure, smelted metal. It was without furnishings or superstructure, aside from a low breastwork at the front, behind which three drivers stood, each holding the separate reins of a tandem of monsters. At the rear, a strange, outward-curving arm or crane of some black, lustrous material ending in a thick disk, rose high in the air. One of the elfin people stood beside this crane.

With exquisite and admirable skill, the drivers brought their unwieldy conveyance forward in a sweeping arc through the empty space between the time-vessel and the surrounding army. The devotees of the sphere, who must have been commanding officers, retired to one side; and the monster-hauled vehicle, passing us closely, was adroitly maneuvered and drawn about till it came to a halt with its rear end opposite the sphere and the black arm inclining above our very heads with its heavy horizontal disk.

The being who stood beside the curving arm began to manipulate an oddly shaped and movable projection (which must have been a sort of lever or control) in its dark surface. Watching him curiously, I became aware of a sudden and increasing glare of light overhead; and looking up, I saw that a lid-like cover was sliding back from the disk at the arm's end, revealing a fire-bright substance that dazzled the eye.

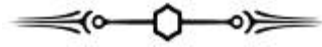
Simultaneously, I felt a sensation of corporeal lightness, of growing weightlessness. I reeled with vertigo, and reaching toward the wall in an effort to steady myself, I floated buoyantly from the floor and drifted in mid-air. Li Wong and the stranger, I perceived, were floundering eerily and helplessly about amid the machinery.

Perplexed by this phenomenon of degravitation, I did not realize at first that there had been a similar levitation of the time-sphere itself. Then, as I turned in my aerial tumbling, I saw that the sphere had risen from the ground and was now on a level with the floor of the strange conveyance. It occurred to me that an unknown magnetic force was being emitted by the bright disk above our heads.

No sooner had I conceived this idea than the outward-curving arm began to rotate, swinging back upon the vehicle of which it formed a part; and the time-machine, as if suspended by invisible chains, swung with it, maintaining a vertical position beneath the moving disk. In a trice, it was gently deposited on the platform. Then, like the switching-off of a light, the glaring disk was covered again by its dark lid, and the properties of normal weight returned to my companions and to me.

CHAPTER IV

The Great Battle



The whole process of loading the sphere upon the platform had been accomplished with remarkable celerity and efficiency. As soon as it was completed the three drivers, in perfect concert, reined their animals about in a long semicircle, and started off on the route by which they had come. Moving at considerable speed, we rolled easily along the wide lane that had been opened through the quaint army. The chariots and foot-soldiers closed behind us as we went; and looking back, I saw them wheel about and reform, with the chariots in the van. Passing through the outmost ranks, we took the lead, and the whole army followed us in martial order across a low plain.

I was struck by the seeming discrepancy between the preter-human control of gravitation possessed by this curious people, and their somewhat primitive modes of warfare and conveyance. Judging them, as I did, by terrestrial standards, I could not reconcile these things; and the true explanation was too bizarre and fantastic for me to have imagined it beforehand.

We proceeded toward our unknown destination, with the dragons trotting at a leisurely pace that covered more ground than one would have expected. I began to observe the surrounding *milieu* and to take note of much that had escaped me heretofore.

The plain, I saw, was treeless, with low hummocks and intervals of winding mounds, and was wholly covered with a short, lichenous growth that formed a kind of yellow-green turf. One of the two suns was hanging at

meridian; and the other was either just rising or setting, for it hovered close to a far-off horizon of glaucous hills. The sky was tinted with deep green, and I saw that this color was due to the combined light of the suns, one of which was azure blue and the other verging upon amber.

After we had gone on for several miles and had passed a row of intervening hummocks, I beheld a strange city in the near distance, with low mushroom domes and peristyles of massive pillars that gleamed like rosy marble in the sunlight amid plots of orange and indigo and violet vegetation.

This city proved to be our objective. It was thronged with people, among whom we passed on the dragon-drawn platform, borne like the trophies of a triumph. The buildings were roomy and well-spaced and were characterized by deep porticoes with swelling, bulbous columns. We learned subsequently that the material used in their construction was a sort of petrified wood, belonging to a genus of giant prehistoric trees, that had been quarried in enormous blocks.

After passing through many streets, we neared, in what was apparently the center of the town, a huge circular edifice. It consisted of a single dome upborne on rows of open, colossal pillars, with an entrance broad and high enough to admit with ease the vehicle on which the time-sphere was being carried. We rolled smoothly through the portals and along a level pavement beneath the vast dome.

The place was illumed by the horizontal rays of the sinking yellow sun, which fell on the ruddy floor in broad shafts between the massy pillars. I received an impression of immense empty space, of rosy-golden air and light. Then, in the center, as we went forward, I saw a sort of dais on which stood an extraordinary machine or contrivance of parti-colored metals, towering alone like an idol in some pagan fane.

The dais, like the building, was circular, and rose four or five feet above the main pavement. It was perhaps sixty feet in diameter, and there were several stairs, graduated to the steps of the pygmy people, that gave access to it. Around the dais, in semi-circles on the pavement, with ample space between, there stood many low tables, supported on carven cubes and with benches about them, all of the same material as the edifice itself. The tables were set with numerous black pots, deep and shallow and multiform, in which grew flowers of opulent orange and cassava colors, together with others of delicate white, of frail pink and silvery green.

These details I perceived hastily and confusedly as our conveyance moved on toward the central dais without endangering any of the tables. A sprinkling of people, who gave the impression of menials, were hurrying about the place, bringing new flower-pots or re-arranging certain of the ones that had already been disposed. Many of the elfin warriors, dismounting from their chariots, had followed us through the great portals.

Now the vehicle had drawn up beside the dais. By the operation of the black arm with its magnetic disk, the time-machine was lifted from the platform and deposited on the dais not far from the tall contrivance of multi-colored metals. Then, circling the dais, the vehicle withdrew with its dragon-team and vanished through the open entrance.

Whether the place was a temple or merely a public hall, I could not decide. It was like the phantasmagoria of some bewildering dream, and the mystery of it all was not solved when I noticed that hundreds of the faery people were seating themselves at the flower-laden tables and were bending toward the blossoms with a regular contraction and expansion of their voluted nostrils, as if they were inhaling delicious perfumes. To complicate my bewilderment still further, I could distinguish nothing on any of the

tables in the form of food, nourishment or even drink, such as these heroic warriors might well be expected to require after an arduous battle.

Dismissing temporarily the baffling enigma, I turned my attention to the peculiar mechanism which occupied the dais together with the time-sphere. Here, too, I found myself at a loss, for I could not even surmise its nature and purpose. I had never seen anything like it among the most ingenious, pernicious and grotesque inventions of terrene mechanics.

The thing was quite gigantic, with a bristling, serried and fearsome array of highly polished rods and pistons. It had long, spiral bands and abrupt, angular flanges, behind which I made out the half-hidden outlines of a squat cylindrical body, mounted on at least seven or eight ponderous legs that terminated in huge pads like the feet of hippopotami.

Above the complicated mass there towered a sort of triple head, or superstructure of three globes, one above the other on a long metal neck. The heads were fitted with rows of eye-like facets, cold and bright as diamonds, and possessed numerous antennæ and queer, unnameable appendages, some of great length. The whole apparatus had the air of some mysterious living entity — a super-machine endowed with sentience and with intellect; and the three-tiered head with its chill eyes appeared to watch us malignly and inscrutably like a metal Argus.

The thing was a miracle of machinery; and it gleamed with hues of gold and steel, of copper and malachite, of silver and azurite and cinnabar. But more and more I was impressed by an evil and brooding intentness, an aura of the sinister and the inimical. The monstrosity was motionless — but intelligent. Then, as I continued my inspection, I saw a movement of the foremost legs, and became aware that the machine was advancing stiffly on its massive pads toward the time-vessel.

It paused at an interval of five or six feet, and put out a long, thin, supple, many-jointed tentacle from the mass of appendages that adorned its topmost head. With this tentacle, like a raised whip, it struck smartly several times at the curving wall of the sphere.

I could not help feeling somewhat alarmed as well as puzzled; for the action was unmistakably hostile. The blows of the tentacle were somehow like a challenge — the equivalent, so to speak, of an actual slap in the face. And the wary movement with which the machine stepped back and stood facing us, after delivering the whip-sharp blows, was curiously like the maneuver of a fighter, squaring himself for combat. The thing seemed almost to crouch on its elephantine metal legs and pads; and there was an air of covert menace in its poised array of mysterious, deadly-looking parts and appendages.

At this moment there occurred a singular interruption which, in all likelihood, was the means of averting our death and the destruction of the time-globe. A group of the elfin people, four in number, ascended the stairs of the dais and approached us, bearing among them a large vessel, like an open shallow urn or deep basin, which was filled to the brim with a sluggish, hueless liquid, suggesting immediately some sort of mineral oil. Behind this group there came a second, carrying another vessel full of the same oleaginous fluid.

The two delegations, moving forward in perfect unison, deposited their burdens at the same instant, with the same peculiar genuflections, setting one of the basins before the time-sphere and the other at the feet of the belligerent alien mechanism. Afterwards they retired discreetly as they had come. The whole performance had the air of a religious rite — a sacrificial offering, intended to appease doubtful or angry deities.

Not without inward amusement, I wondered what use the time-sphere was supposed to make of the oily liquid. It seemed probable that we and our conveyance were regarded as a single mechanism, active and intelligent, and perhaps similar in kind to the curious robot we had found occupying the dais.

The latter machine, however, was manifestly familiar with such offerings; for, without acknowledgment or ceremony, it proceeded to stoop over and dip certain of its metal proboscides in the oil. These organs, I perceived, were hollow at the ends, like the trunks of elephants; and I saw that the liquid in the basin was diminishing rapidly, as if it were being sucked up.

When the vessel was half empty, the monster withdrew its proboscides; and then, by the simultaneous use of these members, turning and coiling with great suppleness in different directions, it began to oil the innumerable joints and flanges of its intricate machinery. Several times it suspended this remarkable process, eyeing the time-sphere balefully as if watching for a hostile movement. The whole performance was inconceivably grotesque and ludicrous — and sinister.

The main floor of the huge pillared hall, I now saw, had filled with the pigmy warriors, who were seated about the flower-burdened tables. All of them seemed to be inhaling the odors of these flowers in a manner that resembled actual ingustation; and I conceived the idea that they were regaling themselves with a feast of perfumes and perhaps required no other nutriment.

Turning from this quaint spectacle, to which I had given only a cursory glance, I perceived that the metal monster had apparently finished the anointing of its complex machinery and was again posing itself in an attitude preparatory for battle. There was a stealthy turning of half-hidden

wheels and cogs, a covert throbbing of well-oiled pistons, as the mechanism faced us; and certain of its tentacles were poised in air like lifted weapons.

What would have happened next, in the normal course of events, I am not altogether sure; but the probabilities are that we would have been blotted out of existence very promptly, efficiently and summarily. Again, by a singular intervention, the time-vessel was saved from the anger of its strange antagonist.

Without warning, there came a flash of brilliant blinding flame, as if a thunderbolt had issued from mid-air between the dais and the dome. There was a crashing, shivering noise that shook and penetrated our virtually sound-proof walls; and everything about us seemed to rock with the convulsions of a violent earthquake. The concussion hurled us back upon our dynamos; and I thought for an instant that the sphere would be flung from the dais. Recovering myself, I saw that a third machine had materialized on the dais, opposite the time-sphere and its opponent!

This machine differed as much from the hostile robot as the latter, in its turn, differed from the time-globe. It was a sort of immense polyhedron, with an arrangement of numberless facets alternately opaque and transparent. Through some of the facets, clearer than glass, I was horrified and astonished to behold the thronging faces of entities similar to, or perhaps identical with, the beings who had threatened us from the air-vessel in that far-off world where we had picked up our unusual passenger.

There could be only one explanation: we had been pursued through the cosmic continuum by these vengeful and pertinacious creatures, who had evidently employed a time-space vehicle of their own. They must have possessed unique instruments of incredible range and delicacy by which to detect and follow our course in the labyrinth of stellar gulfs and ages! Turning to our passenger, I saw by his troubled air and frantic gestures that

he too had recognized the pursuers. Since I had not yet been able to repair our machinery, the position in which we now stood was a serious dilemma. We were without weapons of any kind, for it had not even occurred to me to bring along a revolver. I began to wish that I had fitted the time-machine with the arsenal of an American racketeer.

However, there was little time for either regret or apprehension. The course of events was now taking an unforeseen and incalculable turn. The formidable robot, diverted from its war-like designs upon us by the appearance of the newcomer, had immediately squared itself around to face the polyhedron, with its metal members raised in a flailing gesture of menace.

The occupants of the polyhedron, on their part, seemed to disregard the robot. Several of the opaque facets began to slide back in the manner of ports, and revealed the yawning mouths of tubular weapons, all of which were levelled at the time-sphere. It appeared that these people were intent only on destroying us, after having followed us with fantastical vindictiveness through many æons.

The robot, it would seem, construed the opening of the ports as an act inimical to itself. Or perhaps it did not wish to yield its legitimate prey, the time-sphere, to another and foreign mechanism. At any rate, it bristled forward, winnowing the air with all its tentacles and proboscides, and tramping heavily on the dais with its myriad pads, till it stood within grappling-distance of the polyhedron.

Coils of greyish vapor were beginning to issue from valves in its cylindrical body and pipe-like throat; and raising one of its hollow proboscides, it snorted forth a sudden jet of crimson flame — a briefly flaring tongue that struck an upper facet of the polyhedron, causing it to melt and collapse inward like so much solder.

The occupants of the alien time-machine were now slewing their tube-weapons around to face the robot. A violent fire leaped from one of the tubes, spreading like a fan, and severing cleanly an upraised tentacle of the monster.

At this, the angry mechanism seemed to go mad, and hurled itself at the polyhedron like some enormous octopus of metal. Jets of scarlet fire were issuing from several of its trunk-shaped organs, and great ruinous rents appeared in the facets of the polyhedron beneath their incessant playing.

Undismayed by this, the wielders of the tube-weapons concentrated their violet beams on the robot, inflicting terrific damage. The uppermost of the three globular heads was partly shot away, and metal filaments trailed from its broken rim like a shredded brain. The serried array of tossing members was torn and lopped like a flame-swept forest. Rods, cogs, pistons and other parts dripped on the dais in a molten rain. Two of the foremost legs crumpled in shapeless ruin — but still the monster fought on; and the polyhedron became a twisted wreck beneath the focussing of the red fires.

Soon several of the violet beams were extinguished, and their wielders had dissolved into vapor and ashes. But others were still in action; and one of them struck the central cylinder of the robot, after demolishing the outer machinery, and bored into it steadily like an acetylene torch. The beam must have penetrated a vital part, for suddenly there was a tremendous, all-engulfing flare, a cataclysmic explosion.

The immense dome appeared to totter on its trembling columns, and the dais shook like a stormy sea. Then, an instant later, there fell from a dark cloud of swelling steam, a rain of metal fragments, glancing along our crystalline sides and strewing the dais and the main floor for some distance around. The monster, in its explosion, had involved the alien time-vessel,

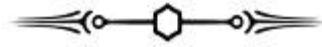
which was wholly riven asunder; and nothing remained of our pursuers but a few blackened cinders.

Apart from this mutual and highly providential destruction of the inimical mechanisms, no serious damage had been done; for the main building, I now perceived for the first time, was deserted — the pygmies had abandoned their feast of odors and had retired discreetly, perhaps at the very onset of the battle. The time-sphere, though it had taken no part in the combat, was left by a singular and ironic fortuity in sole possession of the field.

I decided that fortune, being so favorably disposed toward us, might be tempted even further with impunity. So I opened the door of the vessel, and found that the atmosphere of the world outside was perfectly breathable, though laden with an odd mixture of metallic fumes that lingered from the late explosion, and fruity and luscious fragrances from the potted blossoms.

CHAPTER V

The World of Mohaun Los



Li Wong and the passenger and I emerged on the dais. The yellow sun had gone down, and the place swam with the blue, religious light of its ascendant binary. We were examining the littered ruins of the strange machines when a large delegation of elfin warriors re-entered and approached us. We could not divine their thoughts and emotions; but it seemed to me that their genuflections were even more expressive of profound reverence and gratitude than those with which the time-sphere had been hailed after the routing of the barbarian army. I received an almost telepathic impression that they were thanking us for a supposed act of deliverance at which we had been merely the onlookers.

In time, this impression was to be fully confirmed. The metal monster, it seemed, had come originally, like ourselves, from the outside universe, and had settled itself among this perfume-eating people. They had treated it with all due respect, had housed it in their public hall of assembly and had supplied it liberally with certain mineral lubricants which it required. The machine, in exchange, had deigned to instruct them regarding a few scientific and mechanical secrets such as that of degravitation by means of a reverse magnetic force; but the people, being somewhat non-inventive and non-mechanical by nature, had made little use of this robot-imparted knowledge.

The metal monster, in time, had become disagreeably exacting and tyrannical; and moreover, it had refused flatly to help the pigmies in their war with another people when need arose. Therefore they were glad to be

rid of it; and they seemed to take it for granted that we had made away with the monster as well as with the invading time-machine. So far, I have not thought it worth while to disillusion them.

No less than seven terrestrial months have now gone by since the landing of the sphere. My companions and I are still sojourning among the perfume-eaters; and we have no reason to complain of our lot, and no cause to lament the worlds we have left so far behind us in time and space.

In the interim, we have learned many things, and are now able to hold converse with our hosts, having familiarized ourselves by slow degrees with the peculiar phonetics of their speech.

The name of the world, as well as I can render it in human spelling, is Mohaun Los. Being subject to the gravitational pull of two solar bodies, it follows a somewhat eccentric and prolonged annual orbit. Nevertheless, the climate is equable and salubrious, though marked by meteoric phenomena of an unearthly sort.

The people among whom we are dwelling call themselves the Psounas. They are a fine and estimable race, though bizarre from a human standpoint as any of the mythic tribes whose anatomy and customs were described by Herodotus. They are the ruling race of the planet, and are inconceivably more advanced in many ways than their rude weapons and methods of warfare would lead one to imagine. Astronomy and mathematics, in particular, have been developed by them to a degree that is far beyond the achievement of human savants.

Their food consists of nothing grosser than perfumes; and at first, it was not easy to convince them that we required a more material nourishment. However, once they had grasped the idea, they supplied us abundantly with the meaty foods in which Mohaun Los abounds; and they did not seem to be shocked or scandalized by our base appetites — even though fruits and

other non-atomizable matters are eaten only by animals and the more aboriginal races of this world. The Psounas, indeed, have shown toward us at all times a spirit of urbane tolerance and *laissez faire*.

They are a peaceful race, and during their whole former history have had little need to acquire the martial arts. But the recent evolutionary development of a half-bestial tribe, the Gholpos, who have now learned to organize themselves and to make weapons, and have become quite aggressive as a consequence, has compelled the Psounas to take the field in self-defense.

The descent of the time-machine, falling upon their enemies during a crucial battle, was a most fortunate happening; for these ignorant savages, the Gholpos, regarded it as a manifestation of some divine or demoniac power in league with the Psounas, and were henceforward altogether broken and cowed.

The Psounas, it seems, were prone even from the first to a more naturalistic supposition regarding the character and origin of the time-sphere. Their long familiarity with the strange ultra-stellar robot may have helped to disabuse them of any belief in the supernaturalism of mere machinery. I have had no difficulty in explaining to them the mechanism of our vessel and the voyage we have made along the æons.

My efforts, however, to tell them something of my own world, of its peoples and customs, have so far met with polite incredulity or sheer incomprehension. Such a world, they say, is quite unheard-of; and if they were not so courteous, probably they would tell me that it could not even be imagined by any rational being.

Li Wong and I, as well as the Psounas, have learned to talk with the singular entity whom I rescued from the diabolic living flowers on a world midway between the earth and Mohaun Los. This person calls himself

Tuoquan, and he is a most erudite savant. His ideas and discoveries, being somewhat at variance with the notions that prevail in his own world, had caused him to be regarded with suspicion and hatred by his fellows; and, as I surmised, he had been abandoned by them, after due process of law, to a cruel doom in the jungle.

The time-machine in which they had followed us to Mohaun Los was, he believed, the only vessel of the kind that had so far been invented by this people. Their zealous and fanatic devotion to legality and law-enforcement would have led them to pursue us beyond the boundaries of the universal continuum. Fortunately, there was small likelihood that they would ever dispatch another time-machine on our trail: for the lingering etheric vibrations that had enabled them to follow us, as dogs follow the scent of their quarry, would die out long before they could construct a duplicate of the unreturning polyhedron.

With the aid of the Psounas, who have supplied me with the necessary metallic elements, I have repaired the broken connection in the time-sphere. I have also made a miniature duplicate of the mechanism, in which I am planning to enclose this letter and send it backward through time, in the seemingly far-fetched and fantastic hope that it may somehow reach the earth and be received by you.

The astronomers of the Psounas have helped me to make the needful computations and adjustments which, indeed, would be utterly beyond my own skill or the mathematical knowledge of any human being. By combining in these calculations the chronometric records of the dials in the time-sphere with the ephemerides of Mohaun Los during the past seven months, and allowing for the pauses and changes of speed which we made during our journey, it has been possible to chart the incredibly complicated course which the mechanism must follow in time and space.

If the calculations are correct to the most infinitesimal degree, and the movement of the device is perfectly synchronized, the thing will stop at the very moment and in the very same place from which I left the earth in retrograde time. But of course it will be a miracle if it reaches the earth at all. The Psounas have pointed out to me a ninth-magnitude star which they think is the solar orb of the system in which I was born.

If the letter should ever reach you, I have no reason to think that you will believe my tale.

Nevertheless, I am going to ask you to publish it, even though the world in general will regard it as the fantasy of a madman or a practical joker. It pleases an obscure sense of irony in my mental makeup, to know that the truth will be heard by those among whom it must pass for a fantastic lie. Such an eventuation, perhaps, will be far from novel or unprecedented.

As I have said before, I am well enough contented with life in Mohaun Los. Even death, I am told, is a pleasant thing in this world, for when the Psounas wax old and weary, they repair to a hidden valley in which they are overcome by the lethal and voluptuous perfume of narcotic flowers.

However, it may be that the nostalgia of new ages and new planets will seize me anon, and I shall feel impelled to continue my journey among future cycles. Li Wong, it goes without saying, will accompany me in any such venture: though he is quite happily engaged at present in translating the Odes of Confucius and other Chinese classics for the benefit of the people of Mohaun Los. (This poetry, I might add, is meeting with a better reception than my tales regarding Occidental civilization.)

Tuoquan, who is teaching the Psounas to make the fearfully destructive weapons of his own world, may decide to go with us; for he is full of intellectual curiosities. Perhaps we shall follow the great circle of time, till

the years and æons without number have returned upon themselves once more, and the past is made a sequel to the future!

Yours ever,
Domitian Malgraff.

THE END

The Light from Beyond



IT WILL BE said, by nearly all who peruse this narrative, that I must have been mad from the beginning; that even the first of the phenomena related herein as a sensory hallucination betokening some grave disorder. It is possible that I am mad now, at those times when the gulfwardsliding tide of memory sweeps me away; those times when I am lost anew in the tracts of dreadful light and unknown entity that were opened before me by the last phase of my experience. But I was sane at the outset, and I am still sane enough to write down a sober and lucid account of all that occurred.

My solitary habit of life, as well as my reputation for eccentricity and extravagance, will no doubt be urged against me by many, to support the theory of mental unsoundness. Those who are unconventional enough to credit me with rationality will smile at my story and deem that I have forsaken the province of bizarre pictorial art (in which I have achieved a certain eminence) to invade that of superscientific fiction.

However, if I wished, I could bring forward much corroborative evidence of the strange visitations. Some of the phenomena were remarked by other people in the locality; though I did not know this at the time, owing to my thorough isolation. One or two brief and obscure notices, giving a somewhat commonplace meteoric explanation, appeared shortly afterwards in metropolitan journals, and were reprinted even more briefly and obscurely in scientific gazettes. I shall not quote them here, since to do so would involve a repetition of details which, in themselves, are more or less doubtful and inconclusive.

I am Dorian Wiermoth. My series of illustrative paintings, based on the poems of Poe, will perhaps be familiar to some of my readers.

For a number of reasons, some of which it is needless to mention, I had decided to spend a whole year in the high Sierras. On the shore of a tiny sapphire tarn, in a valley sheltered by hemlocks and granite crags, I had built a rough cabin and had stocked it plentifully with provisions, books, and the materials of my art. For the time being, I was independent of a world whose charms and enchantments were, to say the least, no longer irresistible.

The region possessed, however, other allurements than those of seclusion. Everywhere, in the stark mountain masses and pinnacles, the juniper-studded cliffs, the glacier-moulded sheets of rock, there was a mingling of grandeur and grotesquery that appealed most intimately to my imagination. Though my drawings and paintings were never, in any sense, literal transcriptions of nature, and were often avowedly fantastic, I had made at all times a careful study of natural forms. I realized that the wildest evocations of the unknown are merely, at bottom, recombinations of known shapes and colors, even as the farthest worlds are compositions of elements familiar to terrene chemistry.

Therefore, I found much that was suggestive in this scenery; much that I could interweave with the arabesques of weirdly imaginative designs; or could render more directly, as pure landscape, in a semi-Japanese style with which I was then experimenting.

The place in which I had settled was remote from the state highway, the railroad, and the path of airplanes. My only near neighbors were the mountain crows and jays and chipmunks. Occasionally, in my rambles, I met a fisherman or hunter; but the region was miraculously free of tourists. I began a serene regimen of work and study, which was interrupted by no human agency. The thing that ended my stay so prematurely, came, I am

sure, from a sphere that is not mapped by geographers, nor listed by astronomers.

The mystery began, without forewarning or prescience, on a quiet evening in July, after the scimitar-shaped moon had sheathed itself in the hemlocks. I was sitting in my cabin, reading, for relaxation, a detective story whose title I have since forgotten. The day had been quite warm; there was no wind in that sequestered valley; and the oil lamp was burning steadily between the half-open door and the wide windows.

Then, on the still air, there came a sudden aromatic perfume that filled the cabin like a flooding wave. It was not the resinous odor of the conifers, but a rich and everdeepening spice that was wholly exotic to the region — perhaps alien to the Earth. It made me think of myrrh and sandal and incense; and yet it was none of these, but a stranger thing, whose very richness was pure and supernal as the odors that were said to attend the apparition of the Holy Grail.

Even as I inhaled it, startled, and wondering if I were the victim of some hallucination, I heard a faint music that was somehow allied to the perfume and inseparable from it. The sound, like a breathing of fairy flutes, ethereally sweet, thrilling, eldritch, was all about me in the room; and I seemed to hear it in my inmost brain, as one hears the seawhisper in a shell.

I ran to the door, I flung it wide open, and stepped out into the azure-green evening. The perfume was everywhere, it arose before me, like the frankincense of veiled altars, from the tarn and the hemlocks, and it seemed to fall from the stilly burning stars above the Gothic trees and granite walls, to the north. Then, turning eastward, I saw the mysterious light that palpitated and revolved in a fan of broad beams upon the hill.

The light was soft, rather than brilliant, and I knew that it could be neither aurora nor airplane beacon. It was hueless — and yet somehow it

seemed to include the intimation of a hundred colors lying beyond the familiar spectrum. The rays were like the spokes of a half-hidden wheel that turned slowly and more slowly, but did not change their position. Their center, or hub, was behind the hill. Presently they became stationary, except for a slight trembling. Against them, I saw the bowed masses of several mighty junipers.

I must have stood there for a long while, gaping and staring like any yokel who beholds a marvel beyond his comprehension. I still breathed the unearthly odor, but the music had grown fainter with the slackening of the wheel of light, and had fallen to a sub-auditory sighing — the suspicion of a murmur far away in some undiscovered world. Implicitly, though perhaps illogically, I connected the sound and the scent with that unexplained luminescence. Whether the wheel was just beyond the junipers, on the craggy hilltop, or a billion miles away in astronomic space, I could not decide; and it did not even occur to me that I could climb the hill and ascertain this particular for myself.

My main emotion was a sort of half-mystic wonder, a dreamy curiosity that did not prompt me to action. Idly I waited, with no clear awareness of the passing of time, till the wheel of rays began once more to revolve slowly. It swiftened, and presently I could no longer distinguish the separate beams. All I could see was a whirling disk, like a moon that spun dizzily but maintained the same position relative to the rocks and junipers. Then, without apparent recession, it grew dim and faded on the sapphire darkness. I heard no longer the remote and flute-like murmur; and the perfume ebbed from the valley like an outgoing tide, leaving but elusive wraiths of its unknown spicery.

My sense of wonder sharpened with the passing of these phenomena; but I could form no conclusion as to their origin. My knowledge of natural

science, which was far from extensive, seemed to afford no plausible clue. I felt, with a wild thrilling, half-fearful, half-exultant, that the thing I had witnessed was not to be found in the catalogues compiled by human observers.

The visitation, whatever it was, had left me in a state of profound nervous excitement. Sleep, when it came, was intermittent; and the problematic light, perfume, and melody recurred again and again in my dreams with a singular vividness, as if they had stamped themselves upon my brain with more than the force of normal sensory impressions.

I awoke at earliest dawn, filled with a well-nigh feverish conviction that I must visit the eastern hill immediately and learn if any tangible sign had been left by the agency of the turning beams. After a hasty and half-eaten breakfast, I made the ascent, armed with my drawing-pad and pencils. It was a short climb among over-beetling boulders, sturdy tamaracks, and dwarf oaks that took the form of low-growing bushes.

The hill-top itself comprised an area of several hundred yards, roughly elliptic. It fell gently away toward the east, and ended on two sides in sheerly riven cliffs and jagged scarps. There were patches of soil amid the enormous granite folds and out-croppings; but these patches were bare, except for a few alpine flowers and grasses; and the place was given mainly to a number of gnarled and massive junipers, which had rooted themselves by preference in the solid rock. From the beginning, it had been one of my favorite haunts. I had made many sketches of the mightily mortised junipers, some of which, I verily believe, were more ancient than the famed sequoias, or the cedars of Lebanon.

Surveying the scene with eager eyes in the cloudless morning light, I saw nothing untoward at first. As usual, there were deer-tracks in the basins of friable soil; but apart from these, and my own former footprints, there was

no token of any visitor. Somewhat disappointed, I began to think that the luminous, turning wheel had been far-off in space, beyond the hill.

Then, wandering on toward the lamer levels of the crest, I found, in a sheltered spot, the thing that had previously been hidden from my view by the trees and out-croppings. It was a cairn of granite fragments — but a cairn such as I had never beheld in all my mountain explorations. Built in the unmistakable form of a star with five blunt angles, it rose waist-high from the middle of a plot of intersifting loam and sand. About it grew a few plants of mountain phlox. On one side were the charred remnants of a tree that had been destroyed by lightning in recent years. On two other sides, forming a right angle, were high walls to which several junipers clung like coiling dragons with tenacious claws, embedded in the riven rock.

On the summit of the strange pile, in the center, I perceived a pale and coldly shining stone with star-like points that duplicated and followed the five angles. This stone, I thought, had been shaped by artificial means. I did not recognize its material; and I felt sure that it was nothing native to the region.

I felt the elation of a discoverer, deeming that I had stumbled on the proof of some alien mystery. The cairn, whatever its purpose, whoever its builders, had been reared during the night; for I had visited this very spot on the previous afternoon, a little before sunset, and would have seen the structure if it had been there at that time.

Somehow, I dismissed immediately and forever all idea of human agency. There occurred to me the bizarre thought that voyagers from some foreign world had paused on the hill and had left that enigmatic pile as a sign of their visit. In this manner, the queer nocturnal manifestations were accounted for, even if not fully explained.

Arrested by the weird enigma of it all, I had paused on the verge of the loamy basin, at a distance of perhaps twelve feet from the cairn itself. Now, my brain on fire with fantastical surmise, I stepped forward to examine the cairn more closely. To my utter dumfounding, it appeared to recede before me, preserving the same interval, as I went toward it. Pace after pace I took, but the ground flowed forward beneath me like a treadmill; my moving feet descended in their former tracks; and I was unable to make the least progress toward the goal that was apparently so near at hand! My movements were in no sense impeded, but I felt a growing giddiness, that soon verged upon nausea.

My disconcertment can more readily be imagined than expressed. It seemed obvious that either I or nature had gone suddenly mad. The thing was absurd, impossible — it belied the most elementary laws of dimension. By some incalculable means, a new and arcanic property had been introduced into the space about the cairn.

To test further the presence of this hypothetical property, I abandoned my effort at direct approach, and began to circle the basin, resuming the attempt from other angles. The pile, I found, was equally unapproachable from all sides: at a distance of twelve feet, the soil began its uncanny treadmill movement when I tried to encroach upon it. The cairn, to all intents and purposes, might have been a million miles away, in the gulf between the worlds!

After a while, I gave up my weird and futile experiments, and sat down beneath one of the overhanging junipers. The mystery maddened me, it induced a sort of mental vertigo as I pondered it. But also, it brought into the familiar order of things the exhilaration of a novel and perhaps supernatural element. It spoke of the veiled infinitudes I had vainly longed to explore; it goaded my feverish fantasy to ungovernable flights.

Recalling myself from such conjectures, I studied with sedulous care the stellar pile and the soil around it. Surely the beings who had built it would have left their footprints. However, there were no discernible marks of any kind; and I could learn nothing from the arrangement of the stones, which had been piled with impeccable neatness and symmetry. I was still baffled by the five-pointed object on the summit, for I could recall no terrene mineral that resembled its substance very closely. It was too opaque for moonstone or crystal, too lucid and brilliant for alabaster.

Meanwhile, as I continued to sit there, I was visited by an evanescent whiff of the spicy perfume that had flooded my cabin on the previous night. It came and went like a dying phantom, and I was never quite sure of its presence.

At length I roused myself and made a thorough search of the hill-top, to learn if any other trace had been left by the problematic visitors. In one of the sandy patches of soil, near the northern verge, I saw a curious indentation, like the slender, three-toed footmark of some impossibly gigantic bird.

Close at hand was the small hollow from which a loose fragment of stone, doubtless employed in the building of the cairn, had been removed. The three-pointed mark was very faint, as if the maker had trodden there with an airy lightness. But apart from the finding of this doubtful vestige, my search was wholly without result.

II: The Mystery Deepens

During the weeks that ensued, the unearthly riddle upon which I had fallen preoccupied me almost to the point of mania. Perhaps, if there had been anyone with whom I could have discussed it, anyone who could have thrown upon it the calm and sober light of technical knowledge, I might have rid myself of the obsession to some extent. But I was entirely alone; and, to the best of my belief, the neighborhood of the cairn was visited by no other human being at that time. On several occasions, I renewed my efforts to approach the cairn; but the unheard-of, incredible property of a concealed extension, a treadmill flowing, still inhered, in the space about it, as if established there to guard it from all intrusion. Faced with this abrogation of known geometry, I felt the delirious horror of one for whom the infinite has declared its yawning gulf amid the supposed solidity of finite things.

I made a pencil drawing of the long, light footmark before it was erased by the Sierran winds; and from that one vestige, like a paleontologist who builds up some prediluvian monster from a single bone, I tried to reconstruct in my imagination the being that had left it there. The cairn itself was the theme of numerous sketches; and I believe that I formed and debated in turn almost every conceivable theory as to its purpose and the identity of its builders.

Was it a monument that marked the grave of some intercosmic voyager from Algol or Aldebaran? Had it been reared as a token of discovery and possession by a Columbus of Achernar, landing on our planet? Did it indicate the site of a mysterious cache, to which the makers would return at some future time? Was it a landmark between dimensions? a hieroglyphic

milepost? a signal for the guidance of other travelers who might pass among the worlds, going from deep to deep?

All conjectures were equally valid — and worthless. Before the wildering mystery of it all, my human ignorance drove me to veritable frenzy.

A fortnight had gone by, and the midsummer month was drawing to its close, when I began to notice certain new phenomena. I have mentioned, I think, that there were a few tiny patches of alpine phlox within the circle of occultly altered space around the cairn. One day, with a startlement that amounted to actual shock, I saw that an extraordinary change had occurred in their pale blossoms. The petals had doubled in number, they were now of abnormal size and heaviness, and were tinged with ardent purple and lambent ruby. Perhaps the change had been going on for some time without my perception; perhaps it had developed overnight. At any rate, the modest little flowers had taken on the splendor of asphodels from some mythologic land!

Beyond all mortal trespass, they flamed in that enchanted area, moated with unseen immensities. Day after day I returned, smitten with the awe of one who witnesses a miracle, and saw them there, ever larger and brighter, as if they were fed by other elements than the known air and earth.

Then, presently, in the berries of a great juniper bough that overhung the ring, I perceived a corresponding change. The tiny, dull-blue globes had enlarged enormously, and were colored with a lucent crimson, like the fiery apples of some exotic paradise. At the same time, the foliage of the bough brightened to a tropic verdancy. But on the main portion of the tree, outside the cryptic circle, the leaves and berries were unaltered.

It was as if something of another world had been intercalated with ours... More and more, I began to feel that the star of lucent, nameless stone that

topped the cairn was in some manner of source or key of these unique phenomena. But I could prove nothing, could learn nothing. I could feel sure of only one thing: I was witnessing the action of forces that had never intruded heretofore upon human observation. These forces were obedient to their own laws — which, it appeared, were not altogether synonymous with the laws that man in his presumption has laid down for the workings of nature. The meaning of it all was a secret told in some alien, keyless cipher.

I have forgotten the exact date of those final occurrences, in whose aftermath I was carried beyond the imaginable confines of time and space. Indeed, it seems to me that it would be impossible to date them in terms of terrene chronology. Sometimes I feel that they belong only to the cycles of another world; sometimes, that they never happened; sometimes, that they are still happening — or yet to happen.

I remember, though, that there was a half-moon above the crags and firs on that fatal evening. The air had turned sharp with a prescience of the coming autumn, and I had closed the door and windows and had kindled a fire of dead juniper-wood that was perfuming the cabin with its subtle incense. I heard the sougning of a wind in the higher hemlocks, as I sat before my table, looking over the recent sketches I had made of the cairn and its surroundings, and wondering for perhaps the millionth time if I, or anyone, would ever solve the unearthly riddle.

This time, I began to hear the faint, aerial music, as if in the inmost convolutions of my brain, before I caught the mystic odor. At first, it was little more than the memory of a sound; but it seemed to rise and flow and pour outward, slowly, tortuously, as if through the windings of some immeasurable conch, till it was all about me with its labyrinthine murmuring. The cabin — the world outside — the very heavens — were

filled with tenuous horns and flutes that told the incommunicable dreams of a lost elfland.

Then, above the redolence of the clearly burning, smokeless wood, I smelt that other perfume, rich and ethereal, and no less pervasive than on the former occasion. It seemed that the closed doors and windows were no barrier to its advent: it came as if through another medium than the air, another avenue than the space in which we move and have our being.

In a fever of exalted wonder and curiosity, I threw the door open and went out into the sea of unearthly fragrance and melody that overflowed the world. On the eastern hill, as I had expected, the turning wheel of light was slowing in a stationary position beyond the tower-like junipers. The rays were soft and hueless, as before, but their luster was not diminished by the moon.

This time, I felt an imperative desire to solve the enigma of that visitation: a desire that drew me, stumbling and racing upward among the craggy boulders and low-grown bushes. The music ebbed to a far, faint whisper, the wheel revolved more gradually, as I neared the summit.

A rudiment of that caution which humanity has always felt in the presence of unknown things, impelled me to slacken my reckless pace. Several immense trees and granite outcroppings, however, still intervened betwixt myself and the source of those trembling beams. I stole forward, seeing with an inexpressible thrill, as of some mystic confirmation, that the beams emanated from the site of the stelliform cairn.

It was an easy matter to climb the massive folds of rock and reach a vantage from which I could look directly down on that mysterious area. Crawling flat on my stomach, in a line with the mightiest of the over jutting junipers, I attained my objective, and could peer from behind a heavy bough that grew horizontally along the rock; at the wall's edge. The loamy basin in

which the cairn had been reared was beneath me. Poised in mid-air, level and motionless, and a little to one side of the cairn, there hung a singular vessel that I can liken only to a great open barge with upward curving prow and stern. In its center, above the bulwarks, arose a short mast or slender pillar, topped with a fiery, dazzling disk from which the wheel of beams, as if from a hub, poured vertically and transversely. The whole vessel was made of some highly translucent material, for I could see the dim outlines of the landscape beyond it: and the beams poured earthward through its bottom with little diminution of their radiance. The disk, as well as I could tell from the sharply foreshortened position in which I viewed the barge, was the only semblance of mechanism.

It was as if a crescent moon of milky crystal had come down to flood that shadowy nook with its alien light. And the prow of this moon was no more than six or seven feet from the granite wall that formed my place of vantage!

Four beings, whom I can compare to no earthly creatures, were hovering in the air about the cairn, without wings or other palpable support, as if they, like the barge, were independent of terrene gravity. Though little less in stature than men, their whole aspect was slight and imponderable to a degree that is found only in birds or insects. Their bodily plasm was almost diaphanous, with its intricate nerves and veinings dimly visible, like iridescent threads through a gauzy fabric of pearl and faint rose.

One of them, hanging aloft before the wheel of beams, with his head averted from my view, was holding in his long, frail hands the cold and lucent star that had topped the cairn. The others, stooping airily, were lifting and throwing aside the fragments that had been piled with such impeccable symmetry.

The faces of two were wholly hidden; but the third presented a strange profile, slightly resembling the beak and eye of an owl beneath an earless cranium that rose to a lofty ridge aigretted with nodding tassels like the top-knot of a quail.

The tearing-down of the pile was accomplished with remarkable deftness and speed; and it seemed that the pipy arms of these creatures were far stronger than one would have imagined. During the process of demolition, they stooped lower and lower, till they floated almost horizontally, just above the ground. Soon all the fragments were removed; and the entities began to scoop away with their fingers the soil beneath, whose looseness appeared to evince a previous digging at some recent date.

Breathless and awed before the cryptic vision, I bent forward from my eyrie, wondering what inconceivable treasure, what cache of unguessed glory and mystery, was about to be exhumed by these otherworld explorers.

Finally, from the deep hollow they had made in the loamy soil, one of the beings withdrew his hand, holding aloft a small and colorless object. Apparently it was the thing for which they had been searching, for the creatures abandoned their delving, and all four of them swam upward toward the barge as if wafted by invisible wings. Two of them took their stations in the rear part of the vessel, standing behind the mast-like pillar and its wheel of rays. The one who bore the shining, star-shaped stone, and the carrier of the dull, unknown object, posted themselves in the prow, at a distance of no more than nine or ten feet from the crag on which I crouched.

For the first time, I beheld their faces in front view, peering straight toward me with glowing, pale-gold eyes of inscrutable strangeness. Whether or not they saw me, I have never been sure: they seemed to gaze through me and beyond — illimitably beyond — into occulted gulfs, and upon worlds forever sealed to the sight of man.

I discerned more clearly now, in the fingers of the foremost being, the nameless object they had dug from beneath the dismantled cairn. It was smooth, drab, oval, and about the size of a falcon's egg. I might have deemed it no more than a common pebble, aside from one peculiar circumstance: a crack in the larger end, from which issued several short, luminous filaments. Somehow, the thing reminded me of a riven seed with sprouting roots.

Heedless of any possible peril, I had risen to my feet and staring raptly at the barge and its occupants. After a few moments. I became aware that the wheel of beams had begun to turn gradually, as if in response to an unperceived mechanism. At the same time, I heard the eerie whispering of a million flutes, I breathed a rushing gale of Edenic spices. Faster and faster the rays revolved, sweeping the ground and the air with their phantom spokes, till I saw only a spinning moon that divided the crescent vessel and seemed to cleave asunder the very earth and rocks.

My senses reeled with the dizzy radiance, the everpouring music and perfume. An indescribable sickness mounted through all my being, the solid granite seemed to turn and pitch under my feet like a drunken world, and the heavily buttressed junipers tossed about me against the overturning heavens.

Very swiftly, the wheel, the vessel and its occupants took on a filmy dimness, fading in a manner that is hard to convey, as if, without apparent diminishment of perspective, they were receding into some ultra-geometric space. Their outlines were still before me — and yet they were immeasurably distant. Coincidentally, I felt a terrific suction, an unseen current more powerful than cataracting waters, that seized me as I stood leaning forward from the rock, and swept me past the violently threshing boughs.

I did not fall toward the ground beneath — for there was no longer any ground. With the sensation of being wrenched asunder in the ruin of worlds that had returned to chaos, I plunged into gray and frigid space, that included neither air, earth, stars nor heaven; void, uncreated space, through which the phantom crescent of the strange vessel fell away beneath me, bearing a ghostly moon.

As well as I can recollect, there was no total loss of consciousness at any time during my fall; but, toward the end, there was an increasing numbness, a great dubiety, and a dim perception of enormous arabesques of color that had risen before me, as if created from the gray nothing.

All was misty and two-dimensional, as if this new-made world had not yet acquired the attribute of depth. I seemed to pass obliquely over painted labyrinths. At length, amid soft opals and azures, I came to a winding area of rosy light, and settled into it till the rosiness was all about me.

My numbness gave way to a sharp and painful tingling as of frost-bite, accompanied by a revival of all my senses. I felt a firm grasp about my shoulders, and knew that my head and upper body had emerged from the rosiness.

III: The Infinite World

For an instant, I thought that I was leaning horizontally from a slowly plunging cataract of some occult element, neither water, air nor flame, but somehow analogous to all three. It was more tangible than air, but there was no feeling of wetness; it flowed with the soft fluttering of fire, but it did not burn.

Two of the strange, ethereal entities were drawing me out on a luminous golden cliff, from which an airy vegetation, hued as with the rainbows of towering fountains, projected its lightly arching masses into a gold-green abyss. The crescent barge and its wheel of beams, now stationary, were hovering close at hand in a semi-capsized position. Farther away, beyond the delicate trees, I saw the jutting of horizontal towers. Five suns, drowning in their own glory, were suspended at wide intervals in the gulf.

I wondered at the weird inversion of gravity that my position evinced; and then, as if through a normalizing of equilibrium, I saw that the great cliff was really a level plain, and the cataract a gentle stream.

Now I was standing on the shore, with the people of the barge beside me. They were no longer supporting me with their frail, firm hands. I could not guess their attitude, and my brain awoke with a keen electric shock to the eerie terror and wildering strangeness of it all. Surely the world about me was no part of the known cosmos! The very soil beneath me thrilled and throbbed with unnameable energies. All things, it seemed, were composed of a range of elements nearer to pure force than to common matter. The trees were like fountains of supernal pyrotechnics, arrested and made permanent in mid-air. The structures that soared at far intervals, like celestial minarets, were built as of moulded morning cloud and

luminescence. I breathed an air that was more intoxicating than the air of alpine heights.

Out of this world of marvel, I saw the gathering of many people similar to the entities beside me. Amid the trees and towers, from the shimmering vistas, they came as if summoned by magic. Their movements were swift and silent as the gliding of phantoms, and they seemed to tread the air rather than the ground. I could not hear even the least whispering among them, but I had the feeling of inaudible converse all about me — the vibrant thrilling of overtones too high for the human ear.

Their eyes of pale gold regarded me with unsearchable intentness. I noted their softly curving mouths, which appeared to express an alien sadness, but perhaps were not sad at all. Beneath their gaze, I felt a queer embarrassment, followed quickly by something that I can describe only as an inward illumination. This illumination did not seem to be telepathic: it was merely as if my mind had acquired, as a concomitant of the new existence into which I had fallen, a higher faculty or comprehension impossible in its normal state. This faculty was something that I drew in from the strange soil and air, the presence of the strange multitude. Even then, my understanding was only partial, and I knew there was much that still eluded me through certain insuperable limitations of my brain.

The beings, I thought, were benignantly disposed, but were somewhat puzzled as to what should be done with me. Inadvertently, in a way without parallel, I had trespassed upon another cosmos than my own. Caught in the pull of some transdimensional vortex wrought by the crescent vessel as it departed from earth, I had followed the vessel to its own world, which adjoined ours in transcendental space.

This much I understood, but the mechanics of my entrance into the supernal realm were somewhat obscure to me. Apparently my fall into the

rosy river had been providential, for the stream had revived me with its superaqueous element, and had perhaps served to prevent a sort of frostbite that would otherwise have been incurred by my plunge through an interspatial vacuum.

The purpose of the granite cairn, and the visits made by its builders to earth, were things that I could apprehend but dimly. Something had been planted beneath the cairn, and had been left there for a stated interval, as if to absorb from the grosser mundane soil certain elements or virtues lacking in the soil of this ethereal world. The whole process was based on the findings of an arcanic but severely ordered science; and the experiment was one that had been made before. The lucent stone on the cairn, in some way that I could not grasp, had established around it the guarding zone of fluent treadmill space, on which no earthly denizen could intrude. The earthly changes of the vegetation within this zone were due to certain mystic emanations from the planted seed.

The nature of the seed eluded me; but I knew that it possessed an enormous and vital importance. And the time for its transplanting to the otherworld soil was now at hand. My eyes were drawn to the fingers of the entity who carried it, and I saw that the seed had swollen visibly, that the shining rootlets had lengthened from its riven end.

More and more of the people had gathered, lining the shore of that rosy river, and the intervals of the airy boskage, in silent multitude. Some, I perceived, were thin and languid as wasting specters; and their bodily plasm, as if clouded by illness, was dull and opaque, or displayed unhealthy mottlings of shadow amid the semi-translucence that was plainly a normal attribute.

In a clear area, beside the hovering vessel, a hole had been dug in that Edenic soil. Amid the bewildering flux of my impressions, I had not noticed

it heretofore. Now it assumed a momentous import, as the bearer of the seed went forward to deposit his charge in that shallow pit, and bury it with a curious oval spade of crystalline metal beneath the golden element that was like a mixture of loam and sunset glory.

The crowd had drawn back, leaving a vacant field about the planted seed. There was a sense of awful and solemn, ceremonial expectation in the stillness of that waiting people. Dim, sublime, ungraspable images hovered upon the horizon of my thought like unborn suns; and I trembled with the nearness of some tremendous thaumaturgy. But the purpose of it all was still beyond my comprehension.

Darkly I felt the anticipation of the alien throng ... and somewhere — in myself or in those about me — a great need and a crying hunger that I could not name.

It seemed that whole months and seasons went by; that the five suns revolved about us in altered ecliptics, ere the end of the interim of waiting... But time and its passing were perhaps obedient to unknown laws, like all else in that other sphere, and were not as the hours and seasons of earthly time.

There came at last the awaited miracle: the pushing of a pale shoot from the golden sod. Visibly, dynamically it grew, as if fed with the sap of accelerating years that had turned to mere minutes. From it, there burst a multitude of scions, budding in their turn with irised leafage. The thing was a fountain of unsealed glories, an upward-rushing geyser of emerald and opal that took the form of a tree.

The rate of growth was beyond belief, it was like a legerdmain of gods. From moment to moment the boughs multiplied and lengthened with the leaping of wind wrought flames. The foliage spread like a blown spray of jewels. The plant became colossal, it towered with a pillarthick stem, and its

leafage meshed the five suns, and drooped down toward the river and above the barge, the crowd, and the lesser vegetation.

Still the tree grew, and its boughs came down in glorious arches and festoons, laden with starlike blossoms. I beheld the faces of those about me in a soft umbrage, along arboreal arcades, as if beneath some paradisaical banyan. Then, as the festoons hung nearer, I saw the fruiting of the tree: the small globules, formed as of blood and light, that were left by the sudden withering of the starry blossoms. Swiftly they swelled, attaining the size of pears, and descending till they grew well within my reach — and within the reach of that embowered throng.

It seemed that the marvellous growth had attained its culmination, and was now quiescent. We were domed as if by some fabulous Tree of Life that had sprung from the mated energies of Earth and the celestial Otherworld.

Suddenly I knew the purpose of it all, when I saw that some of the people about me were plucking and devouring the fruit. Many others abstained, however, and I perceived that the sanguine-colored pears were eaten only by the languid, sickly beings I have mentioned before. It seemed that the fruit was a sovereign curative for their illness: even as they devoured it, their bodies brightened, the mottlings of shadow disappeared, and they began to assume the normal aspect of their fellows.

I watched them — and upon me there came a kindred hunger, a profound and mystic craving, together with the reckless vertigo of one who is lost in a world too far and high for human tread. There were doubts that woke within me, but I forgot them even as they woke. There were hands that reached out as if to warn and restrain me, but I disregarded them. One of the luscious, glowing pears hung close before me — and I plucked it.

The thing filled my fingers with a sharp, electric tingling, followed by a coolness that I can compare only to snow beneath a summer sun. It was not

formed of anything that we know as matter — and yet it was firm and solid to the touch, and it yielded a winy juice, an ambrosial pulp, between my teeth. I devoured it avidly, and a high, divine elation coursed like a golden lightning through all my nerves and fibers.

I have forgotten much of the delirium (if delirium it was) that ensued... There were things too vast for memory to retain. And much that I remember could be told only in the language of Olympus.

I recall, however, the colossal expansion of all my senses, the flowering of thought into stars and worlds, as if my consciousness had towered above its mortal tenement with more than the thaumaturgic spreading of the Tree. It seemed that the life of the strange people had become a province of my being, that I knew from all time the arcana of their wisdom, the preterhuman scale of their raptures and sorrows, of their triumphs and disasters.

Holding all this as an appanage. I rose into spheres ulterior and superior. Infinities were laid before me, I conned them as one cons an unrolled map. I peered down upon the utmost heavens, and the hells that lie contiguous to the heavens; and I saw the perennial process of their fiery transmutation and interchange.

I possessed a million eyes and ears; my nerves were lengthened into nether gulfs, were spun out beyond the suns. I was the master of strange senses, that were posted to oversee the activities of unlit stars and blind planets.

All this I beheld and comprehended with the exultation of a drunken demiurge; and all was familiar to me, as if I had seen it in other cycles.

Then, quickly and terribly, there came the sense of division, the feeling that part of myself no longer shared this empire of cosmic immensitude and glory. My delirium shrank like a broken bubble, and I seemed to lose and

leave behind me the colossal, shadowy god that still towered above the stars. I was standing again beneath the Tree, with the transdimensional people about me, and the ruddy fruit still burning in the far-flung arches of leafage.

Here, also, the inexorable doom of division pursued me, and I was no longer one, but two. Distinctly I saw myself, my body and features touched with the ethereal radiance of the beings who were native to that world; but I, who beheld that alter ego, was aware of a dark and iron weight, as if some grosser gravity had claimed me. It seemed that the golden soil was yielding under me like a floor of sunset cloud, and I was plunging and falling through nether emptiness, while that other self remained beneath the Tree.

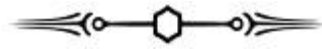
I awoke with the sultry beams of the midday sun upon my face. The loamy ground on which I lay, the scattered fragments of the cairn beside me, and the rocks and junipers, were irrerecognizable as if they had belonged to some other planet than ours. I could not remember them for a long while; and the things I have detailed in this narrative came back to me very tardily, in a broken and disordered sequence.

The manner of my return to Earth is still a mystery. Sometimes I think that the supernal people brought me back in that shining vessel whose mechanism I have never understood. Sometimes, when the madness is upon me, I think that I — or part of myself — was precipitated hither as an aftermath of the eating of the Fruit. The energies to whose operation I exposed myself by that act were wholly incalculable. Perhaps, in accord with the laws of a transdimensional chemistry, there was a partial revibration, and an actual separation of the elements of my body, by which I became two persons, in different worlds. No doubt the physicists will laugh at such ideas...

There were no corporeal ill effects from my experience, apart from a minor degree of what appeared to be frostbite, and a curious burning of the skin, mild rather than severe, that might have resulted from a temporary exposure to radioactive matters. But in all other senses, I was, and still am, a mere remnant of my former self... Among other things, I soon found that my artistic abilities had deserted me; and they have not returned after an interim of months. Some higher essence, it would seem, has departed wholly and forever.

I have become as it were, a clod. But often, to that clod, the infinite spheres descend in their terror and marvel. I have left the lonely Sierras and have sought the refuge of human nearness. But the streets yawn with uncharted abysses, and Powers unsuspected by others move for me amid the crowd. Sometimes I am no longer here among my fellows, but am standing with the eaters of the fruit, beneath the Tree, in that mystic otherworld.

The Hunters from Beyond



I HAVE SELDOM been able to resist the allurement of a bookstore, particularly one that is well supplied with rare and exotic items. Therefore I turned in at Toleman's to browse around for a few minutes. I had come to San Francisco for one of my brief, biannual visits, and had started early that idle forenoon to an appointment with Cyprian Sincaul, the sculptor, a second or third cousin of mine, whom I had not seen for several years.

The studio was only a block from Toleman's, and there seemed to be no especial object in reaching it ahead of time. Cyprian had offered to show me his collection of recent sculptures; but, remembering the smooth mediocrity of his former work, amid which were a few banal efforts to achieve horror and grotesquerie, I did not anticipate anything more than an hour or two of dismal boredom.

The little shop was empty of customers. Knowing my proclivities, the owner and his one assistant became tacitly non-attentive after a word of recognition, and left me to rummage at will among the curiously laden shelves. Wedged in between other but less alluring titles, I found a deluxe edition of Goya's 'Proverbs.' I began to turn the heavy pages, and was soon engrossed in the diabolic art of these nightmare-nurtured drawings.

It has always been incomprehensible to me that I did not shriek aloud with mindless, overmastering terror, when I happened to look up from the volume, and saw the thing that was crouching in a corner of the bookshelves before me. I could not have been more hideously startled if some hellish conception of Goya had suddenly come to life and emerged from one of the pictures in the folio.

What I saw was a forward-slouching, vermin-gray figure, wholly devoid of hair or down or bristles, but marked with faint, etiolated rings like those of a serpent that has lived in darkness. It possessed the head and brow of an anthropoid ape, a semi-canine mouth and jaw, and arms ending in twisted hands whose black hyena talons nearly scraped the floor. The thing was infinitely bestial, and, at the same time, macabre; for its parchment skin was shrivelled, corpselike, mummified, in a manner impossible to convey; and from eye sockets well-nigh deep as those of a skull, there glimmered evil slits of yellowish phosphorescence, like burning sulphur. Fangs that were stained as if with poison or gangrene, issued from the slaving, half-open mouth; and the whole attitude of the creature was that of some maleficent monster in readiness to spring.

Though I had been for years a professional writer of stories that often dealt with occult phenomena, with the weird and the spectral, I was not at this time possessed of any clear and settled belief regarding such phenomena. I had never before seen anything that I could identify as a phantom, nor even an hallucination; and I should hardly have said offhand that a bookstore on a busy street, in full summer daylight, was the likeliest of places in which to see one. But the thing before me was assuredly nothing that could ever exist among the permissible forms of a sane world. It was too horrific, too atrocious, to be anything but a creation of unreality.

Even as I stared across the Goya, sick with a halfincredulous fear, the apparition moved toward me. I say that it moved, but its change of position was so instantaneous, so utterly without effort or visible transition, that the verb is hopelessly inadequate. The foul specter had seemed five or six feet away. But now it was stooping directly above the volume that I still held in my hands, with its loathsomely lambent eyes peering upward at my face, and a graygreen slime drooling from its mouth on the broad pages. At the

same time I breathed an insupportable fetor, like a mingling of rancid serpent-stench with the moldiness of antique charnels and the fearsome reek of newly decaying carrion.

In a frozen timelessness that was perhaps no more than a second or two, my heart appeared to suspend its beating, while I beheld the ghastly face. Gasping, I let the Goya drop with a resonant bang on the floor, and even as it fell, I saw that the vision had vanished.

Toleman, a tonsured gnome with shell-rimmed goggles, rushed forward to retrieve the fallen volume, exclaiming: ‘What is wrong, Mr. Hastane? Are you ill?’ From the meticulousness with which he examined the binding in search of possible damage, I knew that his chief solicitude was concerning the Goya. It was plain that neither he nor his clerk had seen the phantom; nor could I detect aught in their demeanor to indicate that they had noticed the mephitic odor that still lingered in the air like an exhalation from broken graves. And, as far as I could tell, they did not even perceive the grayish slime that still polluted the open folio.

I do not remember how I managed to make my exit from the shop. My mind had become a seething blur of muddled horror, of crawling, sick revulsion from the supernatural vileness I had beheld, together with the direst apprehension for my own sanity and safety. I recall only that I found myself on the street above Toleman’s, walking with feverish rapidity toward my cousin’s studio, with a neat parcel containing the Goya volume under my arm. Evidently, in an effort to atone for my clumsiness, I must have bought and paid for the book by a sort of automatic impulse, without any real awareness of what I was doing.

I came to the building in which was my destination, but went on around the block several times before entering. All the while I fought desperately to regain my self-control and equipoise. I remember how difficult it was even

to moderate the pace at which I was walking, or refrain from breaking into a run; for it seemed to me that I was fleeing all the time from an invisible pursuer. I tried to argue with myself, to convince the rational part of my mind that the apparition had been the product of some evanescent trick of light and shade, or a temporary dimming of eyesight. But such sophistries were useless; for I had seen the gargoylish terror all too distinctly, in an unforgettable fullness of grisly detail.

What could the thing mean? I had never used narcotic drugs or abused alcohol. My nerves, as far as I knew, were in sound condition. But either I had suffered a visual hallucination that might mark the beginning of some obscure cerebral disorder, or had been visited by a spectral phenomenon, by something from realms and dimensions that are past the normal scope of human perception. It was a problem either for the alienist or the occultist.

Though I was still damnably upset, I contrived to regain a nominal composure of my faculties. Also, it occurred to me that the unimaginative portrait busts and tamely symbolic figure-groups of Cyprian Sincaul might serve admirably to sooth my shaken nerves. Even his grotesques would seem sane and ordinary by comparison with the blasphemous gargoyle that had drooled before me in the bookshop.

I entered the studio building, and climbed a worn stairway to the second floor, where Cyprian had established himself in a somewhat capacious suite of rooms. As I went up the stairs, I had the peculiar feeling that somebody was climbing them just ahead of me; but I could neither see nor hear anyone, and the hall above was no less silent, and empty than the stairs.

Cyprian was in his atelier when I knocked. After an interval which seemed unduly long, I heard him call out, telling me to enter. I found him wiping his hands on an old cloth, and surmised that he had been modeling. A sheet of light burlap had been thrown over what was plainly an ambitious

but unfinished group of figures, which occupied the center of the long room. All around were other sculptures, in clay, bronze, marble, and even the terra cotta and steatite which he sometimes employed for his less conventional conceptions. At one end of the room there stood a heavy Chinese screen.

At a single glance I realized that a great change had occurred, both in Cyprian Sincaul and his work. I remembered him as an amiable, somewhat flabby-looking youth, always dapperly dressed, with no trace of the dreamer or visionary. It was hard to recognize him now, for he had become lean, harsh, vehement, with an air of pride and penetration that was almost Luciferian. His unkempt mane of hair was already shot with white, and his eyes were electrically brilliant with a strange knowledge, and yet somehow were vaguely furtive, as if there dwelt behind them a morbid and macabre fear.

The change in his sculpture was no less striking. The respectable tameness and polished mediocrity were gone, and in their place, incredibly, was something little short of genius. More unbelievable still, in view of the laboriously ordinary grotesques of his earlier phase, was the trend that his art had now taken. All around me were frenetic, murdcrous demons, satyrs mad with nympholepsy, ghouls that seemed to sniff the odors of the charnel, lamias voluptuously coiled about their victims, and less namable things that belonged to the outland realms of evil myth and malign superstition.

Sin, horror, blasphemy, diablerie — the lust and malice of pandemonium — all had been caught with impeccable art. The potent nightmarishness of these creations was not calculated to reassure my trembling nerves; and all at once I felt an imperative desire to escape from the studio, to flee from the baleful throng of frozen cacodemons and chiseled chimeras.

My expression must have betrayed my feelings to some extent.

‘Pretty strong work, aren’t they?’ said Cyprian, in a loud, vibrant voice, with a note of harsh pride and triumph. ‘I can see that you are surprised — you didn’t look for anything of the sort, I dare say.’

‘No, candidly, I didn’t,’ I admitted. ‘Good Lord, man, you will become the Michelangelo of diabolism if you go on at this rate; Where on Earth do you get such stuff?’

‘Yes, I’ve gone pretty far,’ said Cyprian, seeming to disregard my question. ‘Further even than you think, probably. If you could know what I know, could see what I have seen, you might make something really worthwhile out of your weird fiction, Philip. You are very clever and imaginative, of course. But you’ve never had any experience.’

I was startled and puzzled. ‘Experience? What do you mean?’

‘Precisely that. You try to depict the occult and the supernatural without even the most rudimentary first-hand knowledge of them. I tried to do something of the same sort in sculpture, years ago, without knowledge; and doubtless you recall the mediocre mess that I made of it. But I’ve learned a thing or two since then.’

‘Sounds as if you had made the traditional bond with the devil, or something of the sort,’ I observed, with a feeble and perfunctory levity.

Cyprian’s eyes narrowed slightly, with a strange, secret look.

‘I know what I know. Never mind how or why. The world in which we live isn’t the only world; and some of the others lie closer at hand than you think. The boundaries of the seen and the unseen are sometimes interchangeable.’

Recalling the malevolent phantom, I felt a peculiar disquietude as I listened to his words. An hour before, his statement would have impressed me as mere theorizing, but now it assumed an ominous and terrifying significance.

‘What makes you think I have had no experience of the occult?’ I asked.

‘Your stories hardly show anything of the kind — anything factual or personal. They are all palpably made up. When you’ve argued with a ghost, or watched the ghouls at meal-time, or fought with an incubus, or suckled a vampire, you may achieve some genuine characterization and color along such lines.’

For reasons that should be fairly obvious, I had not intended to tell anyone of the unbelievable thing at Toleman’s. Now, with a singular mixture of emotions, of compulsive, eery terrors and desire to refute the animadversions of Cyprian, I found myself describing the phantom.

He listened with an inexpressive look, as if his thoughts were occupied with other matters than my story. Then, when I had finished:

‘You are becoming more psychic than I imagined. Was your apparition anything like one of these?’

With the last words, he lifted the sheet of burlap from the muffled group of figures beside which he had been standing.

I cried out involuntarily with the shock of that appalling revelation, and almost tottered as I stepped back.

Before me, in a monstrous semicircle, were seven creatures who might all have been modeled from the gargoyle that had confronted me across the folio of Goya drawings. Even in several that were still amorphous or incomplete, Cyprian had conveyed with a damnable art the peculiar mingling of primal bestiality and nortuary putrescence that had signalized the phantom. The seven monsters had closed in on a cowering, naked girl, and were all clutching foully toward her with their hyena claws. The stark, frantic, insane terror on the face of the girl, and the slavering hunger of her assailants, were alike unbearable. The group was a masterpiece, in its consummate power of technique — but a masterpiece that inspired loathing

rather than admiration. And following my recent experience, the sight of it affected me with indescribable alarm. It seemed to me that I had gone astray from the normal, familiar world into a land of detestable mystery, of prodigious and unnatural menace.

Held by an abhorrent fascination, it was hard for me to wrench my eyes away from the figure-piece. At last I turned from it to Cyprian himself. He was regarding me with a cryptic air, beneath which I suspected a covert gloating.

‘How do you like my little pets?’ he inquired. ‘I am going to call the composition “The Hunters from Beyond.”’

Before I could answer, a woman suddenly appeared from behind the Chinese screen. I saw that she was the model for the girl in the unfinished group. Evidently she had been dressing, and she was now ready to leave, for she wore a tailored suit and a smart toque. She was beautiful, in a dark, semi-Latin fashion; but her mouth was sullen and reluctant, and her wide, liquid eyes were wells of strange terror as she gazed at Cyprian, myself, and the uncovered statue-piece.

Cyprian did not introduce me. He and the girl talked together in low tones for a minute or two, and I was unable to overhear more than half of what they said. I gathered, however, that an appointment was being made for the next sitting. There was a pleading, frightened note in the girl’s voice, together with an almost maternal concern; and Cyprian seemed to be arguing with her or trying to reassure her about something. At last she went out, with a queer, supplicative glance at me — a glance whose meaning I could only surmise and could not wholly fathom.

‘That was Marta,’ said Cyprian. ‘She is half Irish, half Italian. A good model; but my new sculptures seem to be making her a little nervous.’ He

laughed abruptly, with a mirthless, jarring note that was like the cachinnation of a sorcerer.

‘In God’s name, what are you trying to do here?’ I burst out. ‘What does it all mean? Do such abominations really exist, on earth or in any hell?’

He laughed again, with an evil subtlety, and became evasive all at once. ‘Anything may exist, in a boundless universe with multiple dimensions. Anything may be real — or unreal. Who knows? It is not for me to say. Figure it out for yourself, if you can — there’s a vast field for speculation — and perhaps for more than speculation.’

With this, he began immediately to talk of other topics. Baffled, mystified, with a sorely troubled mind and nerves that were more unstrung than ever by the black enigma of it all, I ceased to question him. Simultaneously, my desire to leave the studio became almost overwhelming — a mindless, whirlwind panic that prompted me to run pell-mell from the room and down the stairs into the wholesome normality of the common, Twentieth Century streets. It seemed to me that the rays which fell through the skylight were not those of the sun, but of some darker orb; that the room was touched with unclean webs of shadow where shadow should not have been; that the stone Satans, the bronze lamias, the terracotta satyrs, and the clay gargoyles had somehow increased in number and might spring to malignant life at any instant.

Hardly knowing what I said, I continued to converse for a while with Cyprian. Then, excusing myself on the score of a nonexistent luncheon appointment, and promising vaguely to return for another visit before my departure from the city, I took my leave.

I was surprised to find my cousin’s model in the lower hall, at the foot of the stairway. From her manner, and her first words, it was plain that she had been waiting.

‘You are Mr. Philip Hastane, aren’t you?’ she said, in an eager, agitated voice. ‘I am Marta Fitzgerald. Cyprian has often mentioned you, and I believe that he admires you a lot.

‘Maybe you’ll think me crazy,’ she went on, ‘but I had to speak to you. I can’t stand the way that things are going here, and I’d refuse to come to the place any more, if it wasn’t that I — like Cyprian so much.

‘I don’t know what he has done — but he is altogether different from what he used to be. His new work is so horrible — you can’t imagine how it frightens me. The sculptures he does are more hideous, more hellish all the time. Ugh! those drooling, dead-gray monsters in that new group of his — I can hardly bear to be in the studio with them. It isn’t right for anyone to depict such things. Don’t you think they are awful, Mr. Hastane? They look as if they had broken loose from hell — and make you think that hell can’t be very far away. It is wrong and wicked for anyone to — even imagine them; and I wish that Cyprian would stop. I am afraid that something will happen to him — to his mind — if he goes on. And I’ll go mad, too, if I have to see those monsters many more times. My God! No one could keep sane in that studio.’

She paused, and appeared to hesitate. Then:

‘Can’t you do something, Mr. Hastane! Can’t you talk to him, and tell him how wrong it is, and how dangerous to his mental health? You must have a lot of influence with Cyprian — you are his cousin, aren’t you? And he thinks you are very clever, too. I wouldn’t ask you, if I hadn’t been forced to notice so many things that aren’t as they should be.

‘I wouldn’t bother you, either, if I knew anyone else to ask. He has shut himself up in that awful studio for the past year, and he hardly ever sees anybody. You are the first person that he has invited to see his new

sculptures. He wants them to be a complete surprise for the critics and the public, when he holds his next exhibition.

‘But you’ll speak to Cyprian, won’t you, Mr. Hastane? I can’t do anything to stop him — he seems to exult in the mad horrors he creates. And he merely laughs at me when I try to tell him the danger. However, I think that those things are making him a little nervous sometimes — that he is growing afraid of his own morbid imagination. Perhaps he will listen to you.’

If I had needed anything more to unnerve me, the desperate pleading of the girl and her dark, obscurely baleful hintings would have been enough. I could see that she loved Cyprian, that she was frantically anxious concerning him, and hysterically afraid; otherwise, she would not have approached an utter stranger in this fashion.

‘But I haven’t any influence with Cyprian,’ I protested, feeling a queer embarrassment. ‘And what am I to say to him? His new sculptures are magnificent — I have never seen anything more powerful of the kind. And how could I advise him to stop doing them? There would be no legitimate reason; he would simply laugh me out of the studio. An artist has the right to choose his own subject-matter, even if he takes it from the nether pits of Limbo and Erebus.’

The girl must have pleaded and argued with me for many minutes in that deserted hall. Listening to her, and trying to convince her of my inability to fulfil her request, was like a dialog in some futile and tedious nightmare. During the course of it, she told me a few details that I am unwilling to record in this narrative; details that were too morbid and too shocking for belief, regarding the mental alteration of Cyprian, and his new subject-matter and method of work. There were direct and oblique hints of a growing perversion; but somehow it seemed that much more was being held

back; that even in her most horrifying disclosures she was not wholly frank with me. At last, with some sort of hazy promise that I would speak to Cyprian, would remonstrate with him, I succeeded in getting away from her, and returned to my hotel.

The afternoon and evening that followed were tinged as by the tyrannous adumbration of an ill dream. I felt that I had stepped from the solid earth into a gulf of seething, menacing, madness-haunted shadow, and was lost henceforward to all rightful sense of location or direction. It was all too hideous — and too doubtful and unreal. The change in Cyprian himself was no less bewildering, and hardly less horrifying, than the vile phantom of the bookshop, and the demon sculptures that displayed a magisterial art. It was as if the man had become possessed by some satanic energy or entity.

Everywhere that I went, I was powerless to shake off the feeling of an intangible pursuit, of a frightful, unseen vigilance. It seemed to me that the worm-gray face and sulphurous eyes would reappear at any moment; that the semicanine mouth with its gangrene-dripping fangs might come to slaver above the restaurant table at which I ate, or upon the pillow of my bed. I did not dare to reopen the purchased Goya volume, for fear of finding that certain pages were still defiled with a spectral slime.

I went out and spent the evening in cafés, in theaters, wherever people thronged and lights were bright. It was after midnight when I finally ventured to brave the solitude of my hotel bedroom. Then there were endless hours of nerve-wrung insomnia, of shivering, sweating apprehension beneath the electric bulb that I had left burning. Finally, a little before dawn, by no conscious transition and with no premonitory drowsiness, I fell asleep.

I remember no dreams — only the vast, incubus-like oppression that persisted even in the depth of slumber, as if to drag me down with its

formless, ever-clinging weight into gulfs beyond the reach of created flight or the fathoming of organized entity.

It was almost noon when I awoke, and found myself staring into the verminous, apish, mummy-dead face and hell-illuminated eyes of the gargoyle that had crouched before me in the corner at Toleman's. The thing was standing at the foot of my bed; and behind it as I stared, the wall of the room, which was covered with a floral paper, dissolved in an infinite vista of grayness, teeming with ghoulish forms that emerged like monstrous, misshapen bubbles from plains of undulant ooze and skies of serpentine vapor. It was another world, and my very sense of equilibrium was disturbed by an evil vertigo as I gazed. It seemed to me that my bed was heaving dizzily, was turning slowly, deliriously toward the gulf; that the feculent vista and the vile apparition were swimming beneath me; that I would fall toward them in another moment and be precipitated forever into that world of abysmal monstrosity and obscenity.

In a start of profound alarm, I fought my vertigo, fought the sense that another will than mine was drawing me, that the unclean gargoyle was luring me by some unspeakable mesmeric spell, as a serpent is said to lure its prey. I seemed to read a nameless purpose in its yellow-slitted eyes, in the soundless moving of its oozy lips; and my very soul recoiled with nausea and revulsion as I breathed its pestilential fetor.

Apparently, the mere effort of mental resistance was enough. The vista and the face receded; they went out in a swirl of daylight. I saw the design of tea roses on the wallpaper beyond; and the bed beneath me was sanely horizontal once more. I lay sweating with my terror, all adrift on a sea of nightmare surmise of unearthly threat and whirlpool madness, till the ringing of the telephone bell recalled me automatically to the known world.

I sprang to answer the call. It was Cyprian, though I should hardly have recognized the dead, hopeless tones of his voice, from which the mad pride and self-assurance of the previous day had wholly vanished.

‘I must see you at once,’ he said. ‘Can you come to the studio?’

I was about to refuse, to tell him that I had been called home suddenly, that there was no time, that I must catch the noon train — anything to avert the ordeal of another visit to that place of mephitic evil — when I heard his voice again.

‘You simply must come, Philip. I can’t tell you about it over the phone, but a dreadful thing has happened: Marta had disappeared.’

I consented, telling him that I would start for the studio as soon as I had dressed. The whole nightmare had closed in, had deepened immeasurably with his last words; but remembering the haunted face of the girl, her hysteric fears, her frantic plea and my vague promise, I could not very well decline to go.

I dressed and went out with my mind in a turmoil of abominable conjecture of ghastly doubt, and apprehension all the more hideous because I was unsure of its object I tried to imagine what had happened, tried to piece together the frightful, evasive, half-admitted hints of unknown terror into a tangible coherent fabric, but found myself involved in a chaos of shadowy menace.

I could not have eaten any breakfast, even if I had taken the necessary time. I went at once to the studio, and found Cyprian standing aimlessly amid his baleful statuary. His look was that of a man who has been stunned by the blow of some crushing weapon, or has gazed on the very face of Medusa. He greeted me in a vacant manner, with dull, toneless words. Then, like a charged machine, as if his body rather than his mind were speaking, he began at once to pour forth the atrocious narrative.

‘They took her,’ he said, simply. ‘Maybe you didn’t know it, or weren’t sure of it; but I have been doing all my new sculptures from life — even that last group. Marta was posing for me this forenoon — only an hour ago — or less. I had hoped to finish her part of the modeling today; and she wouldn’t have had to come again for this particular piece. I hadn’t called the Things this time, since I knew she was going to fear them more and more. I think she feared them on my account more than her own — and they were making me a little uneasy too, by the boldness with which they sometimes lingered when I had ordered them to leave, and the way they would sometimes appear when I didn’t want them.

‘I was busy with some of the final touches on the girlfigure, and wasn’t even looking at Marta, when suddenly I knew that the Things were there. The smell told me, if nothing else — I guess you know what the smell is like. I looked up, and found that the studio was full of them — they had never before appeared in such numbers. They were surrounding Marta, were crowding and jostling each other, were all reaching toward her with their filthy talons; but even then, I didn’t think that they could harm her. They aren’t material beings, in the sense that we are, and they really have no physical power outside their own plane. All that they do have is a sort of snaky mesmerism, and they’ll always try to drag you down to their own dimension by means of it. God help anyone who yields to them; but you don’t have to go, unless you are weak, or willing. I’ve never had any doubt of my power to resist them, and I didn’t really dream they could do anything to Marta.

‘It startled me, though, when I saw the whole crowding hell-pack, and I ordered them to go pretty sharply. I was angry — and somewhat alarmed, too. But they merely grimaced and slavered, with that slow, twisting movement of their lips that is like a voiceless gibbering, and then they

closed in on Marta, just as I represented them doing in that accursed group of sculpture. Only there were scores of them now, instead of merely seven.

‘I can’t describe how it happened, but all at once their foul talons had reached the girl; they were pawing her, were pulling at her hands, her arms, her body. She screamed and I hope I’ll never hear another scream so full of black agony and soul-unhinging fright. Then I knew that she had yielded to them — either from choice, or from excess of terror — and knew that they were taking her away.

‘For a moment, the studio wasn’t there at all — only a long, gray, oozing plain, beneath skies where the fumes of hell were writhing like a million ghostly and distorted dragons. Marta was sinking into that ooze, and the Things were all about her, gathering in fresh hundreds from every side, fighting each other for place, sinking with her like bloated, misshaped fen-creatures into their native slime. Then everything vanished — and I was standing here in the studio, all alone with these damned sculptures.’

He paused for a little, and stared with dreary, desolate eyes at the floor. Then:

‘It was awful, Philp, and I’ll never forgive myself for having anything to do with those monsters. I must have been a little mad, but I’ve always had a strong ambition to create some real stuff in the field of the grotesque and visionary and macabre. I don’t suppose you ever suspected, back in my stodgy phase, that I had a veritable appetite for such things. I wanted to do in sculpture what Poe and Lovecraft and Baudelaire have done in literature, what Rops and Goya did in pictorial art.

‘That was what led me into the occult, when I realized my limitations. I knew that I had to see the dwellers of the invisible worlds before I could depict them. I wanted to do it. I longed for this power of vision and

representation more than anything else. And then, all at once, I found that I had the power of summoning the unseen...

‘There was no magic involved, in the usual sense of the word — no spells and circles, no pentacles and burning gums from old sorcery books. At bottom, it was just will power, I guess — a will to divine the satanic, to summon the innumerable malignities and grotesqueries that people other planes than ours, or mingled unperceived with humanity.

‘You’ve no idea what I have beheld, Philip. These statues of mine — these devils, vampires, lamias, satyrs — were all done from life, or, at least from recent memory. The originals are what the occultists would call elementals, I suppose. There are endless worlds, contiguous to our own, or coexisting with it, that such beings inhabit. All the creations of myth and fantasy, all the familiar spirits that sorcerers have evoked, are resident in these worlds.

‘I made myself their master, I levied upon them at will. Then, from a dimension that must be a little lower than all others, a little nearer the ultimate nadir of hell, I called the innominate beings who posed for this new figure-piece.

‘I don’t know what they are,’ but I have surmised a good deal. They are hateful as the worms of the Pit, they are malevolent as harpies, they drool with a poisonous hunger not to be named or imagined. But I believed that they were powerless to do anything outside their own sphere, and I’ve always laughed at them when they tried to entice me — even though that snakish mental pull of theirs was rather creepy at times. It was as if soft, invisible, gelatinous arms were trying to drag you down from the firm shore into a bottomless bog.

‘They are hunters — I am sure of that — the hunters from Beyond. God knows what they will do to Marta now that they have her at their mercy.

That vast, viscid, miasmahaunted place to which they took her is awful beyond the imagining of a Satan. Perhaps — even there — they couldn't harm her body. But bodies aren't what they want — it isn't for human flesh that they grope with those ghoulish claws, and gape and slaver with those gangrenous mouths. The brain itself — and the soul, too — is their food: they are the creatures who prey on the minds of madmen and madwomen, who devour the disembodied spirits that have fallen from the cycles of incarnation, have gone down beyond the possibility of rebirth.

‘To think of Marta in their power — it is worse than hell or madness. Marta loved me, and I loved her, too, though I didn't have the sense to realize it, wrapped as I was in my dark, baleful ambition and impious egotism. She was afraid for me, and I believe she surrendered voluntarily to the Things. She must have thought that they would leave me alone if they secured another victim in my place.’

He ceased, and began to pace idly and feverishly about, I saw that his hollow eyes were alight with torment, as if the mechanical telling of his horrible story had in some manner served to requicken his crushed mind. Utterly and starkly appalled by his hideous revelations, I could say nothing, but could only stand and watch his torture-twisted face.

Incredibly, his expression changed, with a wild, startled look that was instantly transfigured into joy. Turning to follow his gaze, I saw that Marta was standing in the center of the room. She was nude, except for a Spanish shawl that she must have worn while posing. Her face was bloodless as the marble of a tomb, and her eyes were wide and blank, as if she had been drained of all life, of all thought or emotion or memory, as if even the knowledge of horror had been taken away from her. It was the face of the living dead, and the soulless mask of ultimate idiocy; and the joy faded from Cyyrian's eyes as he stepped toward her.

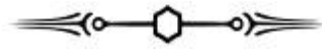
He took her in his arms, he spoke to her with a desperate, loving tenderness, with cajoling and caressing words. She made no answer, however, no movement of recognition or awareness, but stared beyond him with her blank eyes, to which the daylight and the darkness, the void air and her lover's face, would henceforward be the same. He and I both knew, in that instant, that she would never again respond to any human voice, or to human love or terror; that she was like an empty cerement, retaining the outward form of that which the worms have eaten in their mausolean darkness. Of the noisome pits wherein she had been, of that bournless realm and its pullulating phantoms, she could tell us nothing: her agony had ended with the terrible mercy of complete forgetfulness.

Like one who confronts the Gorgon. I was frozen by her wide and sightless gaze. Then, behind her, where stood an array of carved Satans and lamias, the room seemed to recede, the walls and floors dissolved in a seething, unfathomable gulf, amid whose pestilential vapors the statues were mingled in momentary and loathsome ambiguity with the ravening faces, the hunger-contorted forms that swirled toward us from their ultra-dimensional limbo like a devil-laden hurricane from Malebolge. Outlined against that boiling, measureless cauldron of malignant storm, Marta stood like an image of glacial death and silence in the arms of Cyprian. Then, once more, after a little, the abhorrent vision faded, leaving only the diabolic statuary.

I think that I alone had beheld it; that Cyprian had seen nothing but the dead face of Marta. He drew her close, he repeated his hopeless words of tenderness and cajolery. Then, suddenly, he released her with a vehement sob of despair. Turning away, while she stood and still looked on with unseeing eyes, he snatched a heavy sculptor's mallet from the table on which it was lying, and proceeded to smash with furious blows the newly-

modeled group of gargoyles, till nothing was left but the figure of the terrormaddened girl, crouching above a mass of cloddish fragments and formless, half-dried clay.

The Treader of the Dust



... The olden wizards knew him, and named him Quachil Uttaus. Seldom is he revealed: for he dwelleth beyond the outermost circle, in the dark limbo of unsphered time and space. Dreadful is the word that calleth him, though the word be unspoken save in thought: For Quachil Uttaus is the ultimate corruption; and the instant of his coming is like the passage of many ages; and neither flesh nor stone may abide his treading, but all things crumble beneath it atom from atom. And for this, some have called him The Treader of the Dust.

— *The Testaments of Carnamagos.*

IT WAS AFTER INTERMINABLE debate and argument with himself, after many attempts to exorcise the dim, bodiless legion of his fears, that John Sebastian returned to the house he had left so hurriedly. He had been absent only for three days: but even this was an interruption without precedent in the life of reclusion and study to which he had given himself completely following his inheritance of the old mansion together with a generous income. At no time would he have defined fully the reason of his flight: nevertheless, flight had seemed imperative. There was some horrible urgency that had driven him forth; but now, since he had determined to go back, the urgency was resolved into a matter of nerves overwrought by too close and prolonged application to his books. He had fancied certain things: but the fancies were patently absurd and baseless.

Even if the phenomena that had perturbed him were not all imaginary, there must be some natural solution that had not occurred to his overheated mind at the time. The sudden yellowing of a newly purchased notebook, the crumbling of the sheets at their edges, were no doubt due to a latent

imperfection of the paper; and the queer fading of his entries, which, almost overnight, had become faint as age-old writing, was clearly the result of cheap, faulty chemicals in the ink. The aspect of sheer, brittle, worm-hollowed antiquity which had manifested itself in certain articles of furniture, certain portions of the mansion, was no more than the sudden revealing of a covert disintegration that had gone on unnoticed by him in his sedulous application to dark but absorbing researches. And it was this same application, with its unbroken years of toil and confinement, which had brought about his premature aging; so that, looking into the mirror on the morn of his flight, he had been startled and shocked as if by the apparition of a withered mummy. As to the man-servant, Timmers — well, Timmers had been old ever since he could remember. It was only the exaggeration of sick nerves that had lately found in Timmers a decrepitude so extreme that it might fall, without the intermediacy of death, at any moment, into the corruption of the grave.

Indeed, he could explain all that had troubled him without reference to the wild, remote lore, the forgotten demonologies and systems of magic into which he had delved. Those passages in *The Testaments of Carnamagos*, over which he had pondered with weird dismay, were relevant only to the horrors evoked by mad sorcerers in bygone eons....

Sebastian, firm in such convictions, came back at sunset to his house. He did not tremble or falter as he crossed the pine-darkened grounds and ran quickly up the front steps. He fancied, but could not be sure, that there were fresh signs of dilapidation in the steps; and the house itself, as he approached it, had seemed to lean a little aslant, as if from some ruinous settling of the foundations: but this, he told himself, was an illusion wrought by the gathering twilight.

No lamps had been lit, but Sebastian was not unduly surprized by this, for he knew that Timmers, left to his own devices, was prone to dodder about in the gloom like a senescent owl, long after the proper time of lamp-lighting. Sebastian, on the other hand, had always been averse to darkness or even deep shadow; and of late the aversion had increased upon him. Invariably he turned on all the bulbs in the house as soon as the daylight began to fail. Now, muttering his irritation at Timmers' remissness, he pushed open the door and reached hurriedly for the hall switch.

Because, perhaps, of a nervous agitation which he would not own to himself, he fumbled for several moments without finding the knob. The hall was strangely dark, and a glimmering from the ashen sunset, sifted between tall pines into the doorway behind him, was seemingly powerless to penetrate beyond its threshold. He could see nothing; it was as if the night of dead ages had laired in that hallway; and his nostrils, while he stood groping, were assailed by a dry pungency as of ancient dust, an odor as of corpses and coffins long indistinguishable in powdery decay.

* * *

At last he found the switch; but the illumination that responded was somehow dim and insufficient, and he seemed to detect a shadowy flickering, as if the circuit were at fault. However, it reassured him to see that the house, to all appearance, was very much as he had left it. Perhaps, unconsciously, he had feared to find the oaken panels crumbling away in riddled rottenness, the carpet falling into moth-eaten tatters; had apprehended the breaking through of rotted boards beneath his tread.

Where, he wondered now, was Timmers? The aged factotum, in spite of his growing senility, had always been quick to appear; and even if he had not heard his master enter, the switching on of the lights would have

signalized Sebastian's return to him. But, though Sebastian listened with painful intentness, there was no creaking of the familiar tottery footsteps. Silence hung everywhere like a funereal, unstirred arras.

No doubt, Sebastian thought, there was some commonplace explanation. Timmers had gone to the near-by village, perhaps to restock the larder, or in hope of receiving a letter from his master; and Sebastian had missed him on the way home from the station. Or perhaps the old man had fallen ill and was now lying helpless in his room. Filled with this latter thought, he went straight to Timmers' bedchamber, which was on the ground floor, at the back of the mansion. It was empty, and the bed was neatly made and had obviously not been occupied since the night before. With a suspiration of relief that seemed to lift a horrid incubus from his bosom, he decided that his first conjecture had been correct.

Now, pending the return of Timmers, he nerved himself to another act of inspection, and went forthwith into his study. He would not admit to himself precisely what it was that he had feared to see; but at first glance, the room was unchanged, and all things were as they had been at the time of his flurried departure. The confused and high-piled litter of manuscripts, volumes, notebooks on his writing-table had seemingly lain untouched by anything but his own hand; and his bookshelves, with their bizarre and terrifical array of authorities on diabolism, necromancy, goety, on all the ridiculed or outlawed sciences, were undisturbed and intact. On the old lecturn or reading-stand which he used for his heavier tomes, *The Testaments of Carnamagos*, in its covers of shagreen with hasps of human bone, lay open at the very page which had frightened him so unreasonably with its eldritch intimations.

Then, as he stepped forward between the reading-stand and the table, he perceived for the first time the inexplicable *dustiness* of everything. Dust

lay everywhere: a fine gray dust like a powder of dead atoms. It had covered his manuscripts with a deep film, it had settled thickly upon the chairs, the lamp-shades, the volumes; and the rich poppy-like reds and yellows of the oriental rugs were bedimmed by its accumulation. It was as if many desolate years had passed through the chamber since his own departure, and had shaken from their shroud-like garments the dust of all ruined things. The mystery of it chilled Sebastian: for he knew that the room had been clean-swept only three days previous; and Timmers would have dusted the place each morning with meticulous care during his absence.

Now the dust rose up in a light, swirling cloud about him, it filled his nostrils with the same dry odor, as of fantastically ancient dissolution, that had met him in the hall. At the same moment he grew aware of a cold, gusty draft that had somehow entered the room. He thought that one of the windows must have been left open, but a glance assured him that they were shut, with tightly drawn blinds; and the door was closed behind him. The draft was light as the sighing of a phantom, but wherever it passed, the fine, weightless powder soared aloft, filling the air and settling again with utmost slowness. Sebastian felt a weird alarm, as if a wind had blown him from chartless dimensions, or through some hidden rift of ruin; and simultaneously he was seized by a paroxysm of prolonged and violent coughing.

He could not locate the source of the draft. But, as he moved restlessly about, his eye was caught by a low long mound of the gray dust, which had heretofore been hidden from view by the table. It lay beside the chair in which he usually sat while writing. Near the heap was the feather-duster used by Timmers in his daily round of house-cleaning.

It seemed to Sebastian that the rigor of a great, lethal coldness had invaded all his being. He could not stir for several minutes, but stood peering down at the inexplicable mound. In the center of that mound he saw a vague depression, which might have been the mark of a very small footprint half erased by the gusts of air that had evidently taken much of the dust and scattered it about the chamber.

At last the power of motion returned to Sebastian. Without conscious recognition of the impulse that prompted him, he bent forward to pick up the feather-duster. But, even as his fingers touched it, the handle and the feathers crumbled into fine powder which, settling in a low pile, preserved vaguely the outlines of the original object!

A weakness came upon Sebastian, as if the burden of utter age and mortality had gathered crushingly on his shoulders between one instant and the next. There was a whirling of vertiginous shadows before his eyes in the lamplight, and he felt that he should swoon unless he sat down immediately. He put out his hand to reach the chair beside him — and the chair, at his touch, fell instantly into light, downward-sifting clouds of dust.

* * *

Afterward — how long afterward he could not tell — he found himself sitting in the high chair before the lecturn on which *The Testaments of Carnamagos* lay open. Dimly he was surprized that the seat had not crumbled beneath him. Upon him, as once before, there was the urgency of swift, sudden flight from that accursed house: but it seemed that he had grown too old, too weary and feeble; and that nothing mattered greatly — not even the grisly doom which he apprehended.

Now, as he sat there in a state half terror, half stupor, his eyes were drawn to the wizard volume before him: the writings of that evil sage and

seer, Carnamagos, which had been recovered a thousand years ago from some Græco-Bactrian tomb, and transcribed by an apostate monk in the original Greek, in the blood of an incubus-begotten monster. In that volume were the chronicles of great sorcerers of old, and the histories of demons earthly and ultra-cosmic, and the veritable spells by which the demons could be called up and controlled and dismissed. Sebastian, a profound student of such lore, had long believed that the book was a mere medieval legend; and he had been startled as well as gratified when he found this copy on the shelves of a dealer in old manuscripts and incunabula. It was said that only two copies had ever existed, and that the other had been destroyed by the Spanish Inquisition early in the Thirteenth Century.

The light flickered as if ominous wings had flown across it; and Sebastian's eyes blurred with a gathering rheum as he read again that sinister, fatal passage which had served to provoke shadowy fears:

Though Quachil Utaus cometh but rarely, it hath been well attested that his advent is not always in response to the spoken rune and the drawn pentacle.... Few wizards, indeed, would call upon a spirit so baleful.... But let it be understood that he who readeth to himself, in the silence of his chamber, the formula given hereunder, must incur a grave risk if in his heart there abide openly or hidden the least desire of death and annihilation. For it may be that Quachil Utaus will come to him, bringing that doom which toucheth the body to eternal dust, and maketh the soul as a vapor for evermore dissolved. And the advent of Quachil Utaus is foreknowable by certain tokens: for in the person of the evocator, and even perchance in those about him, will appear the signs of sudden age; and his house, and those belongings which he hath touched, will assume the marks of untimely decay and antiquity....

Sebastian did not know that he was mumbling the sentences half aloud as he read them; that he was also mumbling the terrible incantation that followed.... His thoughts crawled as if through a chill and freezing medium. With a dull, ghastly certainty, he knew that Timmers had not gone to the village. He should have warned Timmers before leaving; he should have closed and locked *The Testaments of Carnamagos* ... for Timmers, in his way, was something of a scholar and was not without curiosity concerning the occult studies of his master. Timmers was well able to read the Greek of Carnamagos ... even that dire and soul-blasting formula to which Quachil Uttaus, demon of ultimate corruption, would respond from the outer void.... Too well Sebastian divined the origin of the gray dust, the reason of those mysterious crumbings....

Again he felt the impulse of flight: but his body was a dry dead incubus that refused to obey his volition. Anyway, he reflected, it was too late now, for the signs of doom had gathered about him and upon him.... Yet surely there had never been in his heart the least longing for death and destruction. He had wished only to pursue his delvings into the blacker mysteries that environed the mortal estate. And he had always been cautious, had never cared to meddle with magic circles and evocations of perilous presences. He had known that there were spirits of evil, spirits of wrath, perdition, annihilation: but never, of his own will, should he have summoned any of them from their night-bound abysses....

His lethargy and weakness seemed to increase: it was as if whole lustrums, whole decades of senescence had fallen upon him in the drawing of a breath. The thread of his thoughts was broken at intervals, and he recovered it with difficulty. His memories, even his fears, seemed to totter on the edge of some final forgetfulness. With dulled ears he heard a sound as of timbers breaking and falling somewhere in the house; with dimmed

eyes like those of an ancient he saw the lights waver and go out beneath the swooping of a bat-black darkness.

It was as if the night of some crumbling catacomb had closed upon him. He felt at times the chill faint breathing of the draft that had troubled him before with its mystery; and again the dust rose up in his nostrils. Then he realized that the room was not wholly dark, for he could discern the dim outlines of the lectern before him. Surely no ray was admitted by the drawn window-blinds: yet somehow there was light. His eyes, lifting with enormous effort, saw for the first time that a rough, irregular gap had appeared in the room's outer wall, high up in the north corner. Through it, a single star shone into the chamber, cold and remote as the eye of a demon glaring across intercosmic gulfs.

Out of that star — or from the spaces beyond it — a beam of livid radiance, wan and deathly, was hurled like a spear upon Sebastian. Broad as a plank, unwavering, immovable, it seemed to transfix his very body and to form a bridge between himself and the worlds of unimagined darkness.

He was as one petrified by the gaze of the Gorgon. Then, through the aperture of ruin, there came something that glided stiffly and rapidly into the room toward him, along the beam. The wall seemed to crumble, the rift widened as it entered.

It was a figure no larger than a young child, but sere and shriveled as some millennial mummy. Its hairless head, its unfeatured face, borne on a neck of skeleton thinness, was lined with a thousand reticulated wrinkles. The body was like that of some monstrous, withered abortion that had never drawn breath. The pipy arms, ending in bony claws, were outthrust as if ankylosed in the posture of an eternal dreadful groping. The legs, with feet like those of a pigmy Death, were drawn tightly together as though confined by the swathings of the tomb; nor was there any movement of striding or

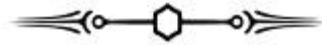
pacing. Upright and rigid, the horror floated swiftly down the wan, deathly gray beam toward Sebastian.

Now it was close upon him, its head level with his brow and its feet opposite his bosom. For a fleeting moment he knew that the horror had touched him with its outflung hands, with its starkly floating feet. It seemed to merge within him, to become one with his being. He felt that his veins were choked with dust, that his brain was crumbling cell by cell. Then he was no longer John Sebastian, but a universe of dead stars and worlds that fell eddying into darkness before the tremendous blowing of some ultrastellar wind....

* * *

The thing that immemorial wizards had named Quachil Uttaus was gone; and night and starlight had returned to that ruinous chamber. But nowhere was there any shadow of John Sebastian: only a low mound of dust on the floor beside the lecturn, bearing a vague depression like the imprint of a small foot ... or of two feet that were pressed closely together.

The Last Incantation



MALYGRIS THE MAGICIAN sat in the topmost room of his tower that was builded on a conicall hill above the heart of Susran, capital of Poseidonis. Wrought of a dark stone mined from deep in the earth, perdurable and hard as the fabled adamant, this tower loomed above all others, and flung its shadow far on the roofs and domes of the city, even as the sinister power of Malygris had thrown its darkness on the minds of men.

Now Malygris was old, and all the baleful might of his enchantments, all the dreadful or curious demons under his control, all the fear that he had wrought in the hearts of kings and prelates, were no longer enough to assuage the black ennui of his days. In his chair that was fashioned from the ivory of mastodons, inset with terrible cryptic runes of red tourmalines and azure crystals, he stared moodily through the one lozenge-shaped window of fulvous glass. His white eyebrows were contracted to a single line on the umber parchment of his face, and beneath them his eyes were cold and green as the ice of ancient floes; his beard, half white, half of a black with glaucous gleams, fell nearly to his knees and hid many of the writhing serpentine characters inscribed in woven silver athwart the bosom of his violet robe. About him were scattered all the appurtenances of his art; the skulls of men and monsters; phials filled with black or amber liquids, whose sacrilegious use was known to none but himself; little drums of vulture-skin, and crotali made from the bones and teeth of the cockodrill, used as an accompaniment to certain incantations. The mosaic floor was partly covered with the skins of enormous black and silver apes: and above the door there

hung the head of a unicorn in which dwelt the familiar demon of Malygris, in the form of a coral viper with pale green belly and ashen mottlings. Books were piled everywhere: ancient volumes bound in serpent-skin, with verdigris-eaten clasps, that held the frightful lore of Atlantis, the pentacles that have power upon the demons of the earth and the moon, the spells that transmute or disintegrate the elements; and runes from a lost language of Hyperborea, which, when uttered aloud, were more deadly than poison or more potent than any philtre.

But, though these things and the power they held or symbolized were the terror of the peoples and the envy, of all rival magicians, the thoughts of Malygris were dark with immitigable melancholy, and weariness filled his heart as ashes fill the hearth where a great fire has died. Immovable he sat, implacable he mused, while the sun of afternoon, declining on the city and on the sea that was beyond the city, smote with autumnal rays through the window of greenish-yellow glass, and touched his shrunken hands with its phantom gold and fired the bales-rubies of his rings till they burned like demonian eyes. But in his musings there was neither light nor fire; and turning from the grayness of the present, from the darkness that seemed to close in so imminently upon the future, he groped among the shadows of memory, even as a blind man who has lost the sun and seeks it everywhere in vain. And all the vistas of time that had been so full of gold and splendor, the days of triumph that were colored like a soaring flame, the crimson and purple of the rich imperial years of his prime, all these were chill and dim and strangely faded now, and the remembrance thereof was no more than the stirring of dead embers. Then Malygris groped backward to the years of his youth, to the misty, remote, incredible years, where, like an alien star, one memory still burned with unfailing luster — the memory of the girl Nylissa whom he had loved in days ere the lust of unpermitted knowledge

and necromantic dominion had ever entered his soul. He had well-nigh forgotten her for decades, in the myriad preoccupations of a life so bizarrely diversified, so replete with occult happenings and powers, with supernatural victories and perils; but now, at the mere thought of this slender and innocent child, who had loved him so dearly when he too was young and slim and guileless, and who had died of a sudden mysterious fever on the very eve of their marriage-day, the mummylike umber of his cheeks took on a phantom flush, and deep down in the icy orbs was a sparkle like the gleam of mortuary tapers. In his dreams arose the irretrievable suns of youth, and he saw the myrtle-shaded valley of Meros, and the stream Zemander, by whose ever-verdant marge he had walked at eventide with Nylissa, seeing the birth of summer stars in the heavens, the stream, and the eyes of his beloved.

Now, addressing the demonian viper that dwelt in the head of the unicorn, Malygris spoke, with the low monotonous intonation of one who thinks aloud:

Viper, in the years before you came to dwell with me and to make your abode in the head of the unicorn, I knew a girl who was lovely and frail as the orchids of the jungle, and who died as the orchids die... Viper, am I not Malygris, in whom is centered the mastery of all occult lore, all forbidden dominations, with dominion over the spirits of earth and sea and air, over the solar and lunar demons, over the living and the dead? If so I desire, can I not call the girl Nylissa, in the very semblance of all her youth and beauty, and bring her forth from the never-changing shadows of the cryptic tomb, to stand before me in this chamber, in the evening rays of this autumnal sun?’

‘Yes, master,’ replied the viper, in a low but singularly penetrating hiss, ‘you are Malygris, and all sorcerous or necromantic power is yours, all incantations and spells and pentacles are known to you. It is possible, if you

so desire, to summon the girl Nylissa from her abode among the dead, and to behold her again as she was ere her loveliness had known the ravening kiss of the worm.'

'Viper, is it well, is it meet, that I should summon her thus? ... Will there be nothing to lose, and nothing to regret?'

The viper seemed to hesitate. Then, in a more slow and measured hiss: 'It is meet for Malygris to do as he would. Who, save Malygris, can decide if a thing be well or ill?'

'In other words, you will not advise me?' the query was as much a statement as a question, and the viper vouchsafed no further utterance.

Malygris brooded for awhile, with his chin on his knotted hands. Then he arose, with a long-unwonted celerity and sureness of movement that belied his wrinkles, and gathered together, from different coigns of the chamber, from ebony shelves, from caskets with locks of gold or brass or electrum, the sundry appurtenances that were needful for his magic. He drew on the floor the requisite circles, and standing within the centermost he lit the thuribles that contained the prescribed incense, and read aloud from a long narrow scroll of gray vellum the purple and vermilion runes of the ritual that summons the departed. The fumes of the censers, blue and white and violet, arose in thick clouds and speedily filled the room with ever-writhing interchanging columns, among which the sunlight disappeared and was succeeded by a wan unearthly glow, pale as the light of moons that ascend from Lethe. With preternatural slowness, with unhuman solemnity, the voice of the necromancer went on in a priest-like chant till the scroll was ended and the last echoes lessened and died out in hollow sepulchral vibrations. Then the colored vapors cleared away, as if the folds of a curtain had been drawn back. But the pale unearthly glow still filled the chamber, and between Malygris and the door where hung the unicorn's head there

stood the apparition of Nylissa, even as she had stood in the perished years, bending a little like a wind-blown flower, and smiling with the unmindful poignancy of youth. Fragile, pallid, and simply gowned, with anemone blossoms in her black hair, with eyes that held the new-born azure of vernal heavens, she was all that Malygris had remembered, and his sluggish heart was quickened with an old delightful fever as he looked upon her.

‘Are you Nylissa?’ he asked— ‘the Nylissa whom I loved in the myrtle-shaded valley of Meros, in the golden-hearted days that have gone with all dead eons to the timeless gulf?’

‘Yes, I am Nylissa,’ Her voice was the simple and rippling silver of the voice that had echoed so long in his memory... But somehow, as he gazed and listened, there grew a tiny doubt — a doubt no less absurd than intolerable, but nevertheless insistent: was this altogether the same Nylissa he had known? Was there not some elusive change, too subtle to be named or defined, had time and the grave not taken something away — an innominable something that his magic had not wholly restored? Were the eyes as tender, was the black hair as lustrous, the form as slim and supple, as those of the girl he recalled? He could not be sure, and the growing doubt was succeeded by a leaden dismay, by a grim despondency that choked his heart as with ashes. His scrutiny became searching and exigent and cruel, and momentarily the phantom was less and less the perfect semblance of Nylissa, momentarily the lips and brow were less lovely, less subtle in their curves; the slender figure became thin, the tresses took on a common black and the neck an ordinary pallor. The soul of Malygris grew sick again with age and despair and the death of his evanescent hope. He could believe no longer in love or youth or beauty; and even the memory of these things was a dubitable mirage, a thing that might or might not have been. There was nothing left but shadow and grayness and dust, nothing but the empty dark

and the cold, and a clutching weight of insufferable weariness, of immedicable anguish.

In accents that were thin and quavering, like the ghost of his former voice, he pronounced the incantation that serves to dismiss a summoned phantom. The form of Nylissa melted upon the air like smoke and the lunar gleam that had surrounded her was replaced by the last rays of the sun. Malygris turned to the viper and spoke in a tone of melancholy reproof:

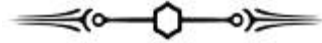
‘Why did you not warn me?’

‘Would the warning have availed?’ was the counter-question. ‘All knowledge was yours, Malygris, excepting this one thing; and in no other way could you have learned it.’

‘What thing?’ queried the magician. ‘I have learned nothing except the vanity of wisdom, the impotence of magic, the nullity of love, and the delusiveness of memory... Tell me, why could I not recall to life the same Nylissa whom I knew, or thought I knew?’

‘It was indeed Nylissa whom you summoned and saw,’ replied the viper. ‘Your necromancy was potent up to this point; but no necromantic spell could recall for you your own lost youth or the fervent and guileless heart that loved Nylissa, or the ardent eyes that beheld her then. This, my master, was the thing that you had to learn.’

A Voyage to Sfanomoë



THERE ARE MANY marvellous tales, untold, unwritten, never to be recorded or remembered, lost beyond all divining and all imagining, that sleep in the double silence of far-recessive time and space. The chronicles of Saturn, the archives of the moon in its prime, the legends of Antillia and Moaria — these are full of an unsurmised or forgotten wonder. And strange are the multitudinous tales withheld by the light-years of Polaris and the Galaxy. But none is stranger, none more marvellous, than the tale of Hotar and Evidon and their voyage to the planet Sfanomoë, from the last isle of foundering Atlantis. Harken, for I alone shall tell the story, who came in a dream to the changeless center where the past and future are always contemporary with the present; and saw the veritable happening thereof; and, waking, gave it words:

Hotar and Evidon were brothers in science as well as by consanguinity. They were the last representatives of a long line of illustrious inventors and investigators, all of whom had contributed more or less to the knowledge, wisdom, and scientific resources of a lofty civilization matured through cycles. One by one they and their fellow-savants had learned the arcanic secrets of geology, of chemistry, of biology, of astronomy; they had subverted the elements, had constrained the sea, the sun, the air, and the force of gravitation, compelling them to serve the uses of man; and lastly they had found a way to release the typhonic power of the atom, to destroy, transmute, and reconstruct the molecules of matter at will.

However, by that irony which attends all the triumphs and achievements of man, the progress of this mastering of natural law was coincidental with the profound geologic changes and upheavals which caused the gradual sinking of Atlantis. Age by age, aeon by aeon, the process had gone on: huge peninsulas, whole sea-boards, high mountain-ranges, citied plains and plateaus, all went down in turn beneath the diluvial waves. With the advance of science, the time and location of future cataclysms was more accurately predictable; but nothing could be done to avert them.

In the days of Hotar and Evidon, all that remained of the former continent was a large isle, called Poseidonis. It was well known that this isle, with its opulent sea-ports, its aeon-surviving monuments of art and architecture, its fertile inland valleys, and mountains lifting their spires of snow above semi-tropic jungles, was destined to go down ere the sons and daughters of the present generation had grown to maturity.

Like many others of their family, Hotar and Evidon had devoted long years of research to the obscure telluric laws governing the imminent catastrophe; and had sought to devise a means of prevention, or, at least, of retardation. But the seismic forces involved were too deeply seated and too widespread in their operation to be controllable in any manner or degree. No magnetic mechanism, no zone of repressive force, was powerful enough to affect them. When the two brothers were nearing middle-age, they realized the ultimate futility of their endeavors; and though the peoples of Poseidonis continued to regard them as possible saviors, whose knowledge and resource were well-nigh superhuman, they had secretly abandoned all effort to salvage the doomed isle, and had retired from sea-gazing Lephara, the immemorial home of their family, to a private observatory and laboratory far up in the mountains of the interior.

Here, with the hereditary wealth at their command, the brothers surrounded themselves not only with all the known instruments and materials of scientific endeavor, but also with a certain degree of personal luxury. They were secluded from the world by a hundred scarps and precipices and by many leagues of little-trodden jungle; and they deemed this seclusion advisable for the labors which they now proposed to themselves, and whose real nature they had not divulged to anyone.

Hotar and Evidon had gone beyond all others of their time in the study of astronomy. The true character and relationship of the world, the sun, the moon, the planetary system, and the stellar universe, had long been known in Atlantis. But the brothers had speculated more boldly, had calculated more profoundly and more closely, than anyone else. In the powerful magnifying mirrors of their observatory, they had given special attention to the neighboring planets; had formed an accurate idea of their distance from the earth; had estimated their relative size; and had conceived the notion that several, or perhaps all, might well be inhabited by creatures similar to man; or, if not inhabited, were potentially capable of supporting human life.

Venus, which the Atlanteans knew by the name of Sfanomoë, was the planet which drew their curiosity and their conjecture more than any other. Because of its position, they surmised that it might readily resemble the earth in climatic conditions and in all the prerequisites of biological development. And the hidden labor to which they were now devoting their energies was nothing less than the invention of a vehicle by which it would be possible to leave the ocean-threatened isle and voyage to Sfanomoë.

Day by day the brothers toiled to perfect their invention; and night by night, through the ranging seasons, they peered at the lustrous orb of their speculations as it hung in the emerald evening of Poseidonis, or above the violet-shrouded heights that would soon take the saffron footprints of the

dawn. And ever they gave themselves to bolder imaginings, to stranger and more perilous projects.

The vehicle they were building was designed with complete foreknowledge of all the problems to be faced, of all the difficulties to be overcome. Various types of air-vessels had been used in Atlantis for epochs; but they knew that none of these would be suitable for their purpose even in a modified form. The vehicle they finally devised, after much planning and long discussion, was a perfect sphere, like a miniature moon; since, as they argued, all bodies travelling through etheric space were of this shape. It was made with double walls of a metallic alloy whose secret they themselves had discovered — an alloy that was both light and tough beyond any substance classified by chemistry or mineralogy. There were a dozen small round windows lined with an unbreakable glass, and a door of the same alloy as the walls, that could be shut with hermetic tightness. The explosion of atoms in sealed cylinders was to furnish the propulsive and levitative power and would also serve to heat the sphere's interior against the absolute cold of space. Solidified air was to be carried in electrum containers and vaporized at the rate which would maintain a respirable atmosphere. And foreseeing that the gravitational influence of the Earth would lessen and cease as they went further and further away from it, they had established in the floor of the sphere a magnetic zone that would simulate the effect of gravity and thus obviate any bodily danger or discomfort to which they might otherwise be liable.

These labors were carried on with no other assistance than that of a few slaves, members of an aboriginal race of Atlantis, who had no conception of the purpose for which the vessel was being built; and who, to ensure their complete discretion, were deaf-mutes. There were no interruptions from visitors, for it was tacitly assumed throughout the isle that Hotar and Evidon

were engaged in seismologic researches that required a concentration both profound and prolonged.

At length, after years of toil, of vacillation, doubt, anxiety, the sphere was completed. Shining like an immense bubble of silver, it stood on a westward-facing terrace of the laboratory, from which the planet Sfanomoë was now visible at eventide beyond the purpling sea of the jungle. All was in readiness: the vessel was amply provisioned for a journey of many lustrums and decades, and was furnished with an abundant supply of books, with implements of art and science, with all things necessary for the comfort and convenience of the voyagers.

Hotar and Evidon were now men of middle years, in the hale maturity of all their powers and faculties. They were the highest type of the Atlantean race, with fair complexions and lofty stature, with the features of a lineage both aristocratic and intellectual. Knowing the nearness of the final cataclysm, they had never married, they had not even formed any close ties; but had given themselves to science with a monastic devotion. They mourned the inevitable passing of their civilization, with all its epoch-garnered lore, its material and artistic wealth, its consummate refinement. But they had learned the universality of the laws whose operation was plunging Atlantis beneath the wave — the laws of change, of increase and decay; and they had schooled themselves to a philosophic resignation — a resignation which, mayhap, was not untempered by a foresight of the singular glory and novel, unique experiences that would be entailed by their flight upon hitherto-untravelled space.

Their emotions, therefore, were a mingling of altruistic regret and personal expectancy, when, on the evening chosen for their departure, they dismissed their wondering slaves with a writ of manumission, and entered the orb-shaped vessel. And Sfanomoë brightened before them with a

pulsing luster, and Poseidonis darkened below, as they began their voyage into the sea-green heavens of the west.

The great vessel rose with a buoyant ease beneath their guidance; till soon they saw the lights of Susran the capital and its galley-crowded port Lephara, where nightly revels were held and the very fountains ran with wine that people might forget awhile the predicted doom. But so high in the air had the vessel climbed that Hotar and Evidon could hear no faintest murmur of the loud lyres and strident merrymaking in the cities beneath. And they went onward and upward, till the world was a dark blur and the skies were aflame with stars that their optic mirrors had never revealed. And anon the black planet below was rimmed with a growing crescent of fire, and they soared from its shadow to unsettling daylight. But the heavens were no longer a familiar blue, but had taken on the lucid ebon of ether; and no star nor world, not even the littlest, was dimmed by the rivalry of the sun. And brighter than all was Sfanomoë, where it hung with unvacillating lambence in the void.

Mile by stellar mile the earth was left behind; and Hotar and Evidon, peering ahead to the goal of their dreams, had almost forgotten it. Then, gazing back, they saw it was no longer below but above them, like a vaster moon. And studying its oceans and isles and continents, they named them over one by one from their maps as the globe revolved; but vainly they sought for Poseidonis, amid an unbroken glittering waste of sea. And the brothers were conscious of that regret and sorrow which is the just due of all vanished beauty, of all sunken splendor. And they mused awhile on the glory that had been Atlantis, and recalled to memory her obelisks and domes and mountains, her palms with high and haughty crests, and the fire-tall plumes of her warriors, that would lift no longer to the sun.

Their life in the orb-like vessel was one of ease and tranquillity, and differed little from that to which they were accustomed. They pursued their wonted studies, they went on with experiments they had planned or begun in past days, they read to each other the classic literature of Atlantis, they argued and discussed a million problems of philosophy or science. And time itself was scarcely heeded by Hotar and Evidon; and the weeks and months of their journey became years, and the years were added into lustrums, and the lustrums into decades. Nor were they sensible of the change in themselves and in each other, as the years began to weave a web of wrinkles in their faces, to tint their brows with the yellow ivory of age and to thread their sable beards with ermine. There were too many things to be solved or debated, too many speculations and surmises to be ventured, for such trivial details as these to usurp their attention.

Sfanomoë grew larger and larger as the half-oblivious years went by; till anon it rolled beneath them with strange markings of untravelled continents and seas unsailed by man. And now the discourse of Hotar and Evidon was wholly concerning the world in which they would so soon arrive, and the peoples, animals, and plants which they might expect to find. They felt in their ageless hearts the thrill of an anticipation without parallel, as they steered their vessel toward the ever-widening orb that swam below them. Soon they hung above its surface, in a cloud-laden atmosphere of tropic warmth; but though they were childishly eager to set foot on the new planet, they sagely decided to continue their journey on a horizontal level till they could study its topography with some measure of care and precision.

To their surprise, they found nothing in the bright expanse below that in any manner suggested the work of men or living beings. They had looked for towering cities of exotic aerial architecture, for broad thoroughfares and canals and geometrically measured areas of agricultural fields. Instead,

there was only a primordial landscape of mountains, marshes, forests, oceans, rivers, and lakes.

At length they made up their minds to descend. Though they were old, old men, with five-foot ermine beards, they brought the moon-shaped vessel down with all the skill of which they had been capable in their prime; and opening the door that had been sealed for decades, they emerged in turn — Hotar preceding Evidon, since he was a little the elder.

Their first impressions were of a torrid heat, of dazzling color and overwhelming perfume. There seemed to be a million odors in the heavy, strange, unstirring air — odors that were almost visible in the form of wreathing vapors — perfumes that were like elixirs and opiates, that conferred at the same time a blissful drowsiness and a divine exhilaration. Then they saw that there were flowers everywhere — that they had descended in a wilderness of blossoms. They were all of unearthly form, of supermundane size and beauty and variety, with scrolls and volutes of petals many-hued, that seemed to curl and twist with a more than vegetable animation or sentiency. They grew from a ground that their overlapping stems and calyxes had utterly concealed; they hung from the boles and fronds of palm-like trees they had mantled beyond recognition; they thronged the water of still pools; they poised on the jungle-tops like living creatures winged for flight to the perfume-drunken heavens. And even as the brothers watched, the flowers grew and faded with a thaumaturgic swiftness, they fell and replaced each other as if by some legerdemain of natural law.

Hotar and Evidon were delighted, they called out to each other like children, they pointed at each new floral marvel that was more exquisite and curious than the rest; and they wondered at the speed of their miraculous growth and decay. And they laughed at the unexampled

bizarrerie of the sight, when they perceived certain animals new to zoology, who were trotting about on more than the usual number of legs, with orchidaceous blossoms springing from their rumps.

They forgot their long voyage through space, they forgot there had ever been a planet called the earth and an isle named Poseidonis, they forgot their lore and their wisdom, as they roamed through the bowers of Sfanomoë. The exotic air and its odors mounted to their heads like a mighty wine; and the clouds of golden and snowy pollen which fell upon them from the arching arbors were potent as some fantastic drugs. It pleased them that their white beards and violet tunics should be powdered with this pollen and with the floating spores of plants that were alien to all terrene botany.

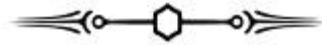
Suddenly, Hotar cried out with a new wonder, and laughed with a more boisterous mirth than before. He had seen that an oddly folded leaf was starting from the back of his shrunken right hand. The leaf unfurled as it grew, it disclosed a flower-bud; and lo! the bud opened and became a triple-chaliced blossom of unearthly hues, adding a rich perfume to the swooning air. Then, on his left hand, another blossom appeared in like manner; and then leaves and petals were burgeoning from his wrinkled face and brow, were growing in successive tiers from his limbs and body, were mingling their hair-like tendrils and tongue-shaped pistils with his beard. He felt no pain, only an infantile surprise and bewilderment as he watched them.

Now from the hands and limbs of Evidon, the blossoms also began to spring. And soon the two old men had ceased to wear a human semblance, and were hardly to be distinguished from the garland-laden trees about them. And they died with no agony, as if they were already part of the teeming floral life of Sfanomoë, with such perceptions and sensations as were appropriate to their new mode of existence. And before long their metamorphosis was complete, and every fiber of their bodies had undergone

a dissolution into flowers. And the vessel in which they had made their voyage was embowered from sight in an ever-climbing mass of plants and blossoms.

Such was the fate of Hotar and Evidon, the last of the Atlanteans, and the first (if not also the last) of human visitors to Sfanomoë.

The Death of Malygris



AT THE HOUR of interlunar midnight, when lamps burned rarely and far apart in Susran, and slow-moving autumn clouds had muffled the stars, King Gadeiron sent forth into the sleeping city twelve of his trustiest mutes. Like shadows gliding through oblivion, they vanished upon their various ways; and each of them, returning presently to the darkened palace, led with him a shrouded figure no less discreet and silent than himself.

In this manner, groping along tortuous alleys, through blind cypress-caverns in the royal gardens, and down subterranean halls and steps, twelve of the most powerful sorcerers of Susran were brought together in a vault of oozing, death-gray granite, far beneath the foundations of the palace.

The entrance of the vault was guarded by earth-demons that obeyed the arch-sorcerer, Maranapion, who had long been the king's councillor. These demons would have torn limb from limb any who came unprepared to offer them a libation of fresh blood. The vault was lit dubiously by a single lamp, hollowed from a monstrous garnet, and fed with vipers' oil. Here Gadeiron, crownless, and wearing sackcloth dyed in sober purple, awaited the wizards on a seat of limestone wrought in the form of a sarcophagus. Maranapion stood at his right hand, immobile, and swathed to the mouth in the garments of the tomb. Before him was a tripod of orichalchum, rearing shoulder-high; and on the tripod, in a silver socket, there reposed the enormous blue eye of a slain Cyclops, wherein the archimage was said to behold weird visions. On this eye, gleaming balefully under the garnet lamp, the gaze of Maranapion was fixed with death-like rigidity.

From these circumstances, the twelve sorcerers knew that the king had convened them only because of a matter supremely grave and secret. The hour and fashion of their summoning, the place of meeting, the terrible elemental guards, the mufti worn by Gadeiron — all were proof of a need for preternatural stealth and privacy.

For awhile there was silence in the vault, and the twelve, bowing deferentially, waited the will of Gadeiron. Then, in a voice that was little more than a harsh whisper, the king spoke:

“What know ye of Malygris?”

Hearing that awful name, the sorcerers paled and trembled visibly; but, one by one, as if speaking by rote, several of the foremost made answer to Gadeiron’s question.

“Malygris dwells in his black tower above Susran,” said the first. “The night of his power is still heavy upon Poseidonis; and we others, moving in that night, are as shadows of a withered moon. He is overlord of all kings and sorcerers. Yea, even the triremes that fare to Tartessos, and the far-flown eagles of the sea, pass not beyond the black falling of his shadow.”

“The demons of the five elements are his familiars,” said the second. “The gross eyes of common men have beheld them often, flying like birds about his tower, or crawling lizard-wise on the walls and pavements.”

“Malygris sits in his high hall,” avowed the third. “Unto him, tribute is borne at the full moon from all the cities of Poseidonis. He takes a tithe of the lading of every galley. He claims a share of the silver and incense, of the gold and ivory sacred to the temples. His wealth is beyond the opulence of the sunken kings of Atlantis... even those kings who were thy forefathers, O Gadeiron.”

“Malygris is old as the moon,” mumbled a fourth. “He will live for ever, armed against death with the dark magic of the moon. Death has become a

slave in his citadel, toiling among other slaves, and striking only at the foes of Malygris.”

“Much of this was true formerly,” quoth the king, with a sinister hissing of his breath. “But now a certain doubt has arisen... for it may be that Malygris is dead.”

A communicated shiver seemed to run about the assembly. “Nay,” said the sorcerer who had affirmed the immortality of Malygris. “For how can this thing have come to pass? The doors of his tower stood open today at sunset; and the priests of the ocean-god, bearing a gift of pearls and purple dyes, went in before Malygris, and found him sitting in his tall chair of the ivory of mastodons. He received them haughtily, without speaking, as is his wont; and his servants, who are half ape and half man, came in unbidden to carry away the tribute.”

“This very night,” said another, “I saw the steadfast lamps of the sable tower, burning above the city like the eyes of Taaran, god of Evil. The familiars have departed not from the tower as such beings depart at the dying of a wizard: for in that case, men would have heard their howling and lamentation in the dark.”

“Aye,” declared Gadeiron, “men have been befooled ere this. And Malygris was ever the master of illuding shows, of feints, and beguilements. But there is one among us who discerns the truth. Maranapion, through the eye of the Cyclops, has looked on remote things and hidden places, Even now, he peers upon his ancient enemy, Malygris.”

Maranapion, shuddering a little beneath his shroud-like garments, seemed to return from his clairvoyant absorption. He raised from the tripod his eyes of luminous amber, whose pupils were black and impenetrable as jet.

“I have seen Malygris,” he said, turning to the conclave. “Many times I have watched him thus, thinking to learn some secret of his close-hidden magic, I have spied upon him at noon, at evenfall, and through the drear, lampless vigils of midnight. And I have beheld him in the ashen dawn and the dawn of quickening fire. But always he sits in the great ivory chair, in the high hall of his tower, frowning as if with meditation. And his hands clutch always the basilisk-carven arms of the chair, and his eyes turn evermore, unshutting, unblinking, toward the orient window and the heavens beyond where only high-risen stars and clouds go by.

“Thus have I beheld him for the space of a whole year and a month. And each day I have seen his monsters bring before him vessels filled with rare meat and drink: and later they have taken away the vessels untouched. And never have I discerned the least movement of his lips, nor any turning or tremor of his body.

“For these reasons, I deem that Malygris is dead; but by virtue of his supremacy in evil and in art magical, he sits defying the worm, still undecayed and incorrupt. And his monsters and his familiars attend him still, deceived by the lying appearance of life; and his power, though now an empty fraud, is still dark and awful upon Poseidonis.”

Again, following the slow-measured words of Maranapion, there was silence in the vault. A dark, furtive triumph smoldered in the face of Gadeiron, on whom the yoke of Malygris had lain heavily, irking his pride. Among the twelve sorcerers, there was none who wished well to Malygris, nor any who did not fear him; and they received the annunciation of his demise with dreadful, half-incredulous joy. Some there were who doubted, holding that Maranapion was mistaken; and in the faces of all, as in somber mirrors, their awe of the master was still reflected.

Maranapion, who had hated Malygris above all others, as the one warlock whose art and power excelled his own, stood aloof and inscrutable like a poisoning vulture.

It was King Gadeiron who broke the gravid silence.

“Not idly have I called ye to this crypt, O sorcerers of Susran: for a work remains to be done. Verily, shall the corpse of a dead necromancer tyrannize over us all? There is mystery here, and a need to move cautiously, for the duration of his necromancy is yet unverified and untested. But I have called ye together in order that the hardest among ye may take council with Maranapion, and aid him in devising such wizardry as will now expose the fraud of Malygris, and evince his mortality to all men, as well as to the fiends that follow him still, and the ministering monsters.”

A babble of disputation rose, and they who were most doubtful of this matter, and feared to work against Malygris in any fashion, begged Gadeiron’s leave to withdraw. In the end, there remained seven of the twelve...

Swiftly, by dim and covert channels, on the day that followed, the death of Malygris was bruited throughout the isle Poseidonis. Many disbelieved the story, for the might of the wizard was a thing seared as with hot iron on the souls of them that had witnessed his thaumaturgies. However, it was recalled that during the past year few had beheld him face to face; and always he had seemed to ignore them, speaking not, and staring fixedly through the tower window, as if intent on far things that were veiled to others. During that time, he had called no man to his presence, and had sent forth no message, no oracle or decree; and they who had gone before him were mainly bearers of tribute and had followed a long-established custom.

When these matters became generally known, there were some who maintained that he sat thus in a long swoon of ecstasy or catalepsy, and

would awaken therefrom in time. Others, however, held that he had died, and was able to preserve the deceitful aspect of life through a spell that endured after him. No man dared to enter the tall, sable tower; and still the shadow of the tower fell athwart Susran like the shadow of an evil gnomon moving on some disastrous dial; and still the umbrage of the power of Malygris lay stagnant as the tomb's night on the minds of men.

Now, among the five sorcerers who had begged Gadeiron's leave to depart, fearing to join their fellows in the making of wizardry against Malygris, there were two that plucked heart a little afterward, when they heard from other sources a confirmation of the vision beheld by Maranapion through the Cyclop's eye.

These two were brothers, named Nygon and Fustules. Feeling a certain shame for their timidity, and desiring to rehabilitate themselves in the regard of the others, they conceived an audacious plan.

When night had again fallen upon the city, bringing no moon, but only obscure stars and the scud of sea-born clouds, Nygon and Fustules went forth through the darkened ways and came to the steep hill at the heart of Susran, whereon, in half-immemorial years, Malygris had established his grim citadel.

The hill was wooded with close-grown cypresses, whose foliage, even to the full sun, was black and sombre as if tarnished by wizard fumes. Crouching on either hand, they leaned like misshapen spirits of the night above the stairs of adamant that gave access to the tower. Nygon and Fustules, mounting the stairs, cowered and trembled when the boughs swung menacingly toward them in violent gusts of wind. They felt the dripping of heavy sea-dews, blown in their faces like a spittle of demons. The wood, it seemed, was full of execrably sighing voices, and weird whimpers and little moanings as of imp-children astray from Satanic dams.

The lights of the tower burned through the waving boughs, and seemed to recede unapproachably as they climbed. More than once the two regretted their temerity, but at length, without suffering palpable harm or hindrance, they neared the portals, which stood eternally open, pouring the effulgence of still, unflaring lamps on the windy darkness.

Though the plan they had conceived was nefarious, they deemed it best to enter boldly. The purpose of their visit if any should challenge or interrogate them was the asking of an oracle from Malygris, who was famed throughout the isle as the most infallible of soothsayers.

Freshening momentarily from the sea beyond Susran, the wind clamored about the tower like an army of devils in flight from deep to deep, and the long mantles of the sorcerers were blown in their faces. But, entering the wide portals, they heard no longer the crying of the gale, and felt no more its pursuing rudeness. At a single step they passed into mausolean silence. Around them the lamplight fell unshaken on caryatids of black marble, on mosaics of precious gems, on fabulous metals and many-storied tapestries; and a tideless perfume weighed upon the air like a balsam of death. They felt an involuntary awe, deeming the mortal stillness a thing that was hardly natural. But, seeing that the tower vestibule was unguarded by any of the creatures of Malygris, they were emboldened to go on and climb the marmorean stairs to the apartments above.

Everywhere, by the light of opulent lamps, they beheld inestimable and miraculous treasures. There were tables of ebony wrought with sorcerous runes of pearl and white coral; webs of silver and samite, cunningly pictured; caskets of electrum overflowing with talismanic jewels; tiny gods of jade and agate; and tall chryselephantine demons. Here was the loot of ages, lying heaped and mingled in utter negligence, without lock or ward, as if free for any casual thief.

Eyeing the riches about them with covetous wonder, the two sorcerers mounted slowly from room to room, unchallenged and unmolested, and came ultimately to that upper hall in which Malygris was wont to receive his visitors.

Here, as elsewhere, the portals stood open before them, and lamps burned as if in a trance of light. The lust of plunder was hot in their hearts. Made bolder still by the seeming desolation, and thinking now that the tower was uninhabited by any but the dead magician, they went in with little hesitancy.

Like the rooms below, the chamber was full of precious artifacts; and iron-bound volumes and brazen books of occult, tremendous necromancy, together with golden and earthen censers, and vials of unshatterable crystal, were strewn in weird confusion about the mosaic floor. At the very center there sat the old archimage in his chair of primeval ivory, peering with stark, immovable eyes at the night-black window.

Nygon and Fustules felt their awe return upon them, remembering too clearly now the thrice-baleful mastery that this man had wielded, and the demon lore he had known, and the spells he had wrought that were irrefragable by other wizards. The specters of these things rose up before them as if by a final necromancy. With down-dropped eyes and humble mien, they went forward, bowing reverentially. Then, speaking aloud, in accordance with their predetermined plan, Fustules requested an oracle of their fortunes from Malygris.

There was no answer, and lifting their eyes, the brothers were greatly reassured by the aspect of the seated ancient. Death alone could have set the grayish pallor on the brow, could have locked the lips in a rigor as of fast-frozen clay. The eyes were like cavern-shadowed ice, holding no other light than a vague reflection of the lamps. Under the beard that was half silver,

half sable, the cheeks had already fallen in as with beginning decay, showing the harsh outlines of the skull. The gray and hideously shrunken hands, whereon the eyes of enchanted beryls and rubies burned, were clenched inflexibly on the chair-arms which had the form of arching basilisks.

“Verily,” murmured Nygon, “there is naught here to frighten or dismay us. Behold, it is only the lich of an old man after all, and one that has cheated the worm of his due provender overlong.”

“Aye,” said Fustules. “But this man, in his time, was the greatest of all necromancers. Even the ring on his little finger is a sovereign talisman. The balas-ruby of the thumbing of his right hand will conjure demons from out of the deep. In the volumes that lie about the chamber, there are secrets of perished gods and the mysteries of planets immemorial. In the vials, there are sirups that give strange visions, and philtres that can revive the dead. Among these things, it is ours to choose freely.”

Nygon, eyeing the gems greedily, selected a ring that encircled the right forefinger with the sixfold coils of a serpent of orichalchum, bearing in its mouth a beryl shaped like a griffin’s egg. Vainly, however, he tried to loosen the finger from its rigid clutch on the chair-arm, to permit the removal of the ring. Muttering impatiently, he drew a knife from his girdle and prepared to hew away the finger. In the meanwhile, Fustules had drawn his own knife as a preliminary before approaching the other hand.

“Is thy heart firm within thee, brother?” he inquired in a sort of sibilant whisper. “If so, there is even more to be gained than these talismanic rings. It is well known that a wizard who attains to such supremacy as Malygris, undergoes by virtue thereof a complete bodily transformation, turning his flesh into elements more subtle than those of common flesh. And whoso

eats of his flesh even so much as a tiny morsel will share thereafter in the powers owned by the wizard.”

Nygon nodded as he bent above the chosen finger. “This, too, was in my thought,” he answered.

Before he or Fustules could begin their ghoulish attack, they were startled by a venomous hissing that appeared to emanate from the bosom of Malygris. They drew back in amazement and consternation, while a small coral viper slid from behind the necromancer’s beard, and glided swiftly over his knees to the floor like a sinuous rill of scarlet. There, coiling as if to strike, it regarded the thieves with eyes that were cold and malignant as drops of frozen poison.

“By the black thorns of Taaran!” cried Fustules. “It is one of Malygris’ familiars. I have heard of this viper—”

Turning, the two would have fled from the room. But, even as they turned, the walls and portals seemed to recede before them, fleeing giddily and interminably, as if unknown gulfs had been admitted to the chamber. A vertigo seized them; reeling, they saw the little segments of mosaic under their feet assume the proportions of mighty flags. Around them the strewn books and censers and vials loomed enormous, rearing above their heads and barring their way as they ran.

Nygon, looking over his shoulder, saw that the viper had turned to a vast python, whose crimson coils were undulating swiftly along the floor. In a colossal chair, beneath lamps that were large as suns, there sat the colossal form of the dead archimage, in whose presence Nygon and Fustules were no more than pigmies. The lips of Malygris were still immobile beneath his beard; and his eyes still glared implacably upon the blackness of the far window. But at that instant a voice filled the awful spaces of the room, reverberating like thunder in the heavens, hollow and tremendous:

“Fools! ye have dared to ask me for an oracle. And the oracle is — death!”

Nygon and Fustules, knowing their doom, fled on in a madness of terror and desperation. Beyond the towering thuribles, the tomes that were piled like pyramids, they saw the threshold in intermittent glimpses, like a remote horizon. It withdrew before them, dim and unattainable. They panted as runners pant in a dream. Behind them, the vermilion python crawled; and overtaking them as they tried to round the brazen back of a wizard volume, it struck them down like fleeing dormice...

In the end, there was only a small coral viper, that crept back to its hiding-place in the bosom of Malygris...

Toiling by day and night, in the vaults under the palace of Gadeiron, with impious charms and unholy conjurations, and fouler chemistries, Maranapion and his seven coadjutors had nearly completed the making of their sorcery.

They designed an involution against Malygris that would break the power of the dead necromancer by rendering evident to all the mere fact of his death. Employing an unlawful Atlantean science, Maranapion had created living plasm with all the attributes of human flesh, and had caused it to grow and flourish, fed with blood. Then he and his assistants, uniting their wills and convoking the forces that were blasphemy to summon, had compelled the shapeless, palpitating mass to put forth the limbs and members of a new-born child; and had formed it ultimately, after all the changes that man would undergo between birth and senescence, into an image of Malygris.

Now, carrying the process even further, they caused the simulacrum to die of extreme age, as Malygris had apparently died. It sat before them in a

chair, facing toward the east, and duplicating the very posture of the magician on his seat of ivory.

Nothing remained to be done. Forspent and weary, but hopeful, the sorcerers waited for the first signs of mortal decay in the image. If the spells they had woven were successful, a simultaneous decay would occur in the body of Malygris, incorruptible heretofore. Inch by inch, member by member, he would rot in the adamantine tower; His familiars would desert him, no longer deceived; and all who came to the tower would know his mortality; and the tyranny of Malygris would lift from Susran, and his necromancy be null and void as a broken pentacle in sea-girt Poseidonis.

For the first time since the beginning of their invultuation, the eight magicians were free to intermit their vigilance without peril of invalidating the charm. They slept soundly, feeling that their repose was well earned. On the morrow they returned, accompanied by King Gadeiron, to the vault in which they had left the plasmic image.

Opening the sealed door, they were met by a charnel odor, and were gratified to perceive in the figure the unmistakable signs of decomposition. A little later, by consulting the Cyclops' eye, Maranapion verified the paralleling of these marks in the features of Malygris.

A great jubilation, not unmingled with relief, was felt by the sorcerers and by King Gadeiron. Heretofore, not knowing the extent and duration of the powers wielded by the dead master, they had been doubtful of the efficacy of their own magic. But now, it seemed, there was no longer any reason for doubt.

On that very day it happened that certain seafaring merchants went before Malygris to pay him, according to custom, a share of the profits of their latest voyage. Even as they bowed in the presence of the master, they became aware, by sundry disagreeable tokens, that they had borne tribute to

a corpse. Not daring even then to refuse the long-exacted toll, they flung it down and fled from the place in terror.

Soon, in all Susran, there was none who doubted any longer the death of Malygris. And yet, such was the awe he had wrought through many lustrums, that few were venturous enough to invade the tower; and thieves were wary, and would not try to despoil its fabled treasures.

Day by day, in the blue, monstrous eye of the Cyclops, Maranapion saw the rotting of his dreaded rival. And upon him presently there came a strong desire to visit the tower and behold face to face that which he had witnessed only in vision. Thus alone would his triumph be complete.

So it was that he and the sorcerers who had aided him, together with King Gadeiron, went up to the sable tower by the steps of adamant, and climbed by the marble stairs, even as Nygon and Fustules before them, to the high room in which Malygris was seated... But the doom of Nygon and Fustules, being without other witnesses than the dead, was wholly unknown to them.

Boldly and with no hesitation they entered the chamber. Slanting through the western window, the sun of late afternoon fell goldenly on the dust that had gathered everywhere. Spiders had woven their webs on the bright-jeweled censers, on the graven lamps, and the metal-covered volumes of sorcery. The air was stagnant with a stifling foulness of death.

The intruders went forward, feeling that impulse which leads the victors to exult over a vanquished enemy. Malygris sat unbowed and upright, his black and tattered fingers clutching the ivory chair-arms as of yore, and his empty orbits glowering still at the eastern window. His face was little more than a bearded skull; and his blackening brow was like worm-pierced ebony.

“O Malygris, I give thee greeting,” said Maranapion in a loud voice of mockery. “Grant, I beseech thee, a sign, if thy wizardry still prevails, and hath not become the appanage of oblivion.”

“Greeting, O Maranapion,” replied a grave and terrible voice that issued from the maggot-eaten lips. “Indeed, I will grant thee a sign. Even as I, in death, have rotted upon my seat from the foul sorcery which was wrought in the vaults of King Gadeiron, so thou and thy fellows and Gadeiron, living, shall decay and putrefy wholly in an hour, by virtue of the curse that I put upon ye now.”

Then the shrunken corpse of Malygris, fulminating the runes of an old Atlantean formula, cursed the eight sorcerers and King Gadeiron. The formula, at frequent intervals, was cadenced with fatal names of lethal gods; and in it were told the secret appellations of the black god of time, and the Nothingness that abides beyond time; and use was made of the titles of many tomb-lairing demons. Heavy and hollow-sounding were the runes, and in them one seemed to hear a noise of great blows on sepulchral doors, and a clangor of downfallen slabs. The air darkened as if with the hovering of seasonless night, and thereupon, like a breathing of the night, a chillness entered the chamber; and it seemed that the black wings of ages passed over the tower, beating prodigiously from void to void, ere the curse was done.

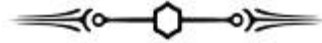
Hearing that maranatha, the sorcerers were dumb with the extremity of their dread; and even Maranapion could recall no counter-spell effectual in any degree against it. All would have fled from the room ere the curse ended, but a mortal weakness was upon them, and they felt a sickness as of quick-coming death. Shadows were woven athwart their eyes; but through the shadows, each beheld dimly the instant blackening of the faces of his fellows, and saw the cheeks fall ruinously, and the lips curl back on the teeth like those of long-dead cadavers.

Trying to run, each was aware of his own limbs that rotted beneath him, pace by pace, and felt the quick sloughing of his flesh in corruption from the bone. Crying out with tongues that shriveled ere the cry was done, they fell down on the floor of the chamber. Life lingered in them, together with the dire knowledge of their doom, and they preserved something of hearing and sight. In the dark agony of their live corruption, they tossed feebly to and fro, and crawled inchmeal on the chill mosaic. And they still moved in this fashion, slowly and more imperceptibly, till their brains were turned to gray mold, and the sinews were parted from their bones, and the marrow was dried up.

Thus, in an hour, the curse was accomplished. The enemies of the necromancer lay before him, supine and shrunken, in the tomb's final posture, as if doing obeisance to a seated Death. Except for the garments, none could have told King Gadeiron from Maranapion, nor Maranapion from the lesser wizards.

The day went by, declining seaward; and, burning like a royal pyre beyond Susran the sunset flung an aureate glare through the window, and then dropped away in red brands and funereal ashes. And in the twilight a coral viper glided from the bosom of Malygris, and weaving among the remnant of them that lay on the floor, and slipping silently down the stairs of marble, it passed forever from the tower.

The Tale of Satampira Zeiros



I, SATAMPRA ZEIROs of Uzuldaroum, shall write with my left hand, since I have no longer any other, the tale of everything that befell Tirouv Ompallios and myself in the shrine of the god Tsathoggua, which lies neglected by the worship of man in the jungle-taken suburbs of Commorion, that long-deserted capital of the Hyperborean rulers. I shall write it with the violet juice of the *suvana*-palm, which turns to a blood-red rubric with the passage of years, on a strong vellum that is made from the skin of the mastodon, as a warning to all good thieves and adventurers who may hear some lying legend of the lost treasures of Commorion and be tempted thereby.

Now, Tirouv Ompallios was my life-long friend and my trustworthy companion in all such enterprises as require deft fingers and a habit of mind both agile and adroit. I can say without flattering myself, or Tirouv Ompallios either, that we carried to an incomparable success more than one undertaking from which fellow-craftsmen of a much wider renown than ourselves might well have recoiled in dismay. To be more explicit, I refer to the theft of the jewels of Queen Cunambria, which were kept in a room where two-score venomous reptiles wandered at will; and the breaking of the adamantine box of Acromi, in which were all the medallions of an early dynasty of Hyperborean kings. It is true that these medallions were difficult and perilous to dispose of, and that we sold them at a dire sacrifice to the captain of a barbarian vessel from remote Lemuria: but nevertheless, the breaking of that box was a glorious feat, for it had to be done in absolute

silence, on account of the proximity of a dozen guards who were all armed with tridents. We made use of a rare and mordant acid... but I must not linger too long and too garrulously by the way, however great the temptation to ramble on amid heroic memories and the high glamor of valiant or sleightful deeds.

In our occupation, as in all others, the vicissitudes of fortune are oftentimes to be reckoned with; and the goddess Chance is not always prodigal of her favors. So it was that Tirouv Ompallios and I, at the time of which I write, had found ourselves in a condition of pecuniary depletion, which, though temporary, was nevertheless extreme, and was quite inconvenient and annoying, coming as it did on the heel of more prosperous days, of more profitable midnights. People had become accursedly chary of their jewels and other valuables, windows and doors were double-barred, new and perplexing locks were in use, guards had grown more vigilant or less somnolent, — in short, all the natural difficulties of our profession had multiplied themselves. At one time we were reduced to the stealing of more bulky and less precious merchandise than that in which we customarily dealt; and even this had its dangers. Even now, it humiliates me to remember the night when we were nearly caught with a sack of red yams; and I mention all this that I may not seem in any wise vainglorious.

One evening, in an alley of the more humble quarter of Uzuldaroum, we stopped to count our available resources, and found that we had between us exactly three pazoors — enough to buy a large bottle of pomegranate wine or two loaves of bread. We debated the problem of expenditure.

“The bread,” contended Tirouv Ompallios, “will nurture our bodies, will lend a new and more expeditious force to our spent limbs, and our toilworn fingers.”

“The pomegranate wine,” said I, “will ennoble our thoughts, will inspire and illuminate our minds, and perchance will reveal to us a mode of escape from our present difficulties.”

Tirouv Ompallios yielded without undue argument to my superior reasoning, and we sought the doors of an adjacent tavern. The wine was not of the best, in regard to flavor, but the quantity and strength were all that could be desired. We sat in the crowded tavern, and sipped it at leisure, till all the fire of the bright red liquor had transferred itself to our brains. The darkness and dubiety of our future ways became illumined as by the light of rosy cressets, and the harsh aspect of the world was marvellously softened. Anon, there came to me an inspiration.

“Tirouv Ompallios,” I said, “is there any reason why you and I, who are brave men and nowise subject to the fears and superstitions of the multitude, should not avail ourselves of the kingly treasures of Commorion? A day’s journey from this tiresome town, a pleasant sojourn in the country, an afternoon or forenoon of archaeological research — and who knows what we should find?”

“You speak wisely and valiantly, my dear friend,” rejoined Tirouv Ompallios. “Indeed, there is no reason why we should not replenish our deflated finances at the expense of a few dead kings or gods.”

Now Commorion, as all the world knows, was deserted many hundred years ago because of the prophecy of the White Sybil of Polarion, who foretold an undescribed and abominable doom for all mortal beings who should dare to tarry within its environs. Some say that this doom was a pestilence that would have come from the northern waste by the paths of the jungle tribes; others, that it was a form of madness; at any rate, no one, neither king nor priest nor merchant nor laborer nor thief, remained in Commorion to abide its arrival, but all departed in a single migration to

found at the distance of a day's journey the new capital, Uzuldaroum. And strange tales are told, of horrors and terrors not to be faced or overcome by man, that haunt forevermore the shrines and mausoleums and palaces of Commoriom. And still it stands, a luster of marble, a magnificence of granite, all a-throng with spires and cupolas and obelisks that the mighty trees of the jungle have not yet overtowered, in a fertile inland valley of Hyperborea. And men say that in its unbroken vaults there lies entire and undespoiled as of yore the rich treasure of olden monarchs; that the high-built tombs retain the gems and electrum that were buried with their mummies; that the fanes have still their golden altar-vessels and furnishings, the idols their precious stones in ear and mouth and nostril and navel.

I think that we should have set out that very night, if we had only had the encouragement and inspiration of a second bottle of pomegranate wine. As it was, we decided to start at early dawn: the fact that we had no funds for our journey was of small moment, for, unless our former dexterity had altogether failed us, we could levy a modicum of involuntary tribute from the guileless folk of the country-side. In the meanwhile, we repaired to our lodgings, where the landlord met us with a grudging welcome and a most ungracious demand for his money. But the golden promise of the morrow had armed us against all such trivial annoyances, and we waved the fellow aside with a disdain that appeared to astonish if not to subdue him.

We slept late, and the sun had ascended far upon the azure acclivity of the heavens when we left the gates of Uzuldaroum and took the northern road that leads toward Commoriom. We breakfasted well on some amber melons, and a stolen fowl that we cooked in the woods, and then resumed our wayfaring. In spite of a fatigue that increased upon us toward the end of the day, our trip was a pleasurable one, and we found much to divert us in

the varying landscapes through which we passed, and in their people. Some of these people, I am sure, must still remember us with regret, for we did not deny ourselves anything procurable that tempted our fancy or our appetites.

It was an agreeable country, full of farms and orchards and running waters and green, flowery woods. At last, somewhere in the course of the afternoon, we came to the ancient road, long disused and well-nigh overgrown, which runs from the highway through the elder jungle to Commorion.

No one saw us enter this road, and thenceforward we met no one. At a single step, we passed from all human ken; and it seemed that the silence of the forest around us had lain unstirred by mortal footfall ever since the departure of the legendary king and his people so many centuries before. The trees were vaster than any we had ever seen, they were interwoven by the endless labyrinthine volumes, the eternal web-like convolutions of creepers almost as old as they themselves. The flowers were unwholesomely large, their petals bore a lethal pallor or a sanguinary scarlet; and their perfumes were overpoweringly sweet or fetid. The fruits along our way were of great size, with purple and orange and russet colors, but somehow we did not dare to eat them.

The woods grew thicker and more rampant as we went on, and the road, though paved with granite slabs, was more and more overgrown, for trees had rooted themselves in the interstices, often forcing the wide blocks apart. Though the sun had not yet neared the horizon, the shades that were cast upon us from gigantic boles and branches became ever denser, and we moved in a dark-green twilight fraught with oppressive odors of lush growth and of vegetable corruption. There were no birds nor animals, such as one would think to find in any wholesome forest, but at rare intervals a

stealthy viper with pale and heavy coils glided away from our feet among the rank leaves of the roadside, or some enormous moth with baroque and evil-colored mottlings flew before us and disappeared in the dimness of the jungle. Abroad already in the half-light, huge purpureal bats with eyes like tiny rubies arose at our approach from the poisonous-looking fruits on which they feasted, and watched us with malign attention as they hovered noiselessly in the air above. And we felt, somehow, that we were being watched by other and invisible presences; and a sort of awe fell upon us, and a vague fear of the monstrous jungle; and we no longer spoke aloud, or frequently, but only in rare whispers.

Among other things, we had contrived to procure along our way a large leathern bottle full of palm-spirit. A few sips of the ardent liquor had already served to lighten more than once the tedium of our journey; and now it was to stand us in good stead. Each of us drank a liberal draught, and presently the jungle became less awesome; and we wondered why we had allowed the silence and the gloom, the watchful bats and the brooding immensity, to weigh upon our spirits even for a brief while; and I think that after a second draught we began to sing.

When twilight came, and a waxing moon shone high in the heavens after the hidden daystar had gone down, we were so imbued with the fervor of adventure that we decided to push on and reach Commorion that very night. We supped on food that we had levied from the country-people, and the leathern bottle passed between us several times. Then, considerably fortified, and replete with hardihood and the valor of a lofty enterprise, we resumed our journeying.

Indeed, we had not much farther to go. Even as we were debating between ourselves, with an ardor that made us oblivious of our long wayfaring, what costly loot we would first choose from among all the

mythical treasures of Commorion, we saw in the moonlight the gleam of marble cupolas above the tree-tops, and then between the boughs and boles the wan pillars of shadowy porticoes. A few more steps, and we trod upon paven streets that ran transversely from the high-road we were following, into the tall, luxuriant woods on either side, where the fronds of mighty palmferns overtopped the roofs of ancient houses.

We paused, and again the silence of an elder desolation claimed our lips. For the houses were white and still as sepulchers, and the deep shadows that lay around and upon them were chill and sinister and mysterious as the very shadow of death. It seemed that the sun could not have shone for ages in this place — that nothing warmer than the spectral beams of the cadaverous moon had touched the marble and granite ever since that universal migration prompted by the prophecy of the White Sybil of Polarion.

“I wish it were daylight,” murmured Tirouv Ompallios. His low tones were oddly sibilant, were unnaturally audible in the dead stillness. “Tirouv Ompallios,” I replied, “I trust that you are not growing superstitious. I should be loth to think that you are succumbing to the infantile fancies of the multitude. Howbeit, let us have another drink.”

We lightened the leathern bottle appreciably by the demand we now made upon its contents, and were marvellously cheered thereby — so much so, indeed, that we forthwith started to explore a left-hand avenue, which, though it had been laid out with mathematical directness, vanished at no great distance among the fronded trees. Here, somewhat apart from the other buildings, in a sort of square that the jungle had not yet wholly usurped, we found a small temple of antique architecture which gave the impression of being far older even than the adjoining edifices. It also differed from these in its material, for it was builded of a dark basaltic stone heavily encrusted with lichens that seemed of a coeval antiquity. It was

square in form, and had no domes nor spires, no façade of pillars, and only a few narrow windows high above the ground. Such temples are rare in Hyperborea now-a-days; but we knew it for a shrine of Tsathoggua, one of the elder gods, who receives no longer any worship from men, but before whose ashen altars, people say, the furtive and ferocious beasts of the jungle, the ape, the giant sloth and the long-toothed tiger, have sometimes been seen to make obeisance and have been heard to howl or whine their inarticulate prayers.

The temple, like the other buildings, was in a state of well-nigh perfect preservation: the only signs of decay were in the carved lintel of the door, which had crumbled and splintered away in several places. The door itself, wrought of a swarthy bronze all overgreened by time, stood slightly ajar. Knowing that there should be a jewelled idol within, not to mention the various altar-pieces of valuable metals, we felt the urge of temptation.

Surmising that strength might be required to force open the verdigris-covered door, we drank deeply, and then applied ourselves to the task. Of course, the hinges were rusted; and only by dint of mighty and muscular heavings did the door at last begin to move. As we renewed our efforts, it swung slowly inward with a hideous grating and grinding that mounted to an almost vocal screech, in which we seemed to hear the tones of some unhuman entity. The black interior of the temple yawned before us, and from it there surged an odor of long-imprisoned mustiness combined with a queer and unfamiliar fetidity. To this, however, we gave little heed in the natural excitement of the moment.

With my usual foresight, I had provided myself with a piece of resinous wood earlier in the day, thinking that it might serve as a torch in case of any nocturnal explorations of Commorion. I lit this torch, and we entered the shrine.

The place was paven with immense quinquangular flags of the same material from which its walls were built. It was quite bare, except for the image of the god enthroned at the further end, the two-tiered altar of obscenely-figured metal before the image, and a large and curious-looking basin of bronze supported on three legs, which occupied the middle of the floor. Giving this basin hardly a glance, we ran forward, and I thrust my torch into the face of the idol.

I had never seen an image of Tsathoggua before, but I recognized him without difficulty from the descriptions I had heard. He was very squat and pot-bellied, his head was more like that of a monstrous toad than a deity, and his whole body was covered with an imitation of short fur, giving somehow a vague suggestion of both the bat and the sloth. His sleepy lids were half-lowered over his globular eyes; and the tip of a queer tongue issued from his fat mouth. In truth, he was not a comely or personable sort of god, and I did not wonder at the cessation of his worship, which could only have appealed to very brutal and aboriginal men at any time.

Tirouv Ompallios and I began to swear simultaneously by the names of more urbane and civilized deities, when we saw that not even the commonest of semi-precious gems was visible anywhere, either upon or within any feature or member of this execrable image. With a niggardliness beyond parallel, even the eyes had been carven from the same dull stone as the rest of the abominable thing, and mouth, nose, ears and all other orifices were unadorned. We could only wonder at the avarice or poverty of the beings who had wrought this unique bestiality.

Now that our minds were no longer enthralled by the hope of immediate riches, we became more keenly aware of our surroundings in general; and in particular we noticed the unfamiliar feter I have spoken of previously, which had now increased uncomfortably in strength. We found that it came

from the bronze basin, which we proceeded to examine, though without any idea that the examination would be profitable or even pleasant.

The basin, I have said, was very large; indeed, it was no less than six feet in diameter by three in depth, and its brim was the height of a tall man's shoulder from the floor. The three legs that bore it were curved and massive and terminated in feline paws displaying their talons. When we approached and peered over the brim, we saw that the bowl was filled with a sort of viscous and semi-liquescient substance, quite opaque and of a sooty color. It was from this that the odor came — an odor which, though unsurpassably foul, was nevertheless not an odor of putrefaction, but resembled rather the smell of some vile and unclean creature of the marshes. The odor was almost beyond endurance, and we were about to turn away when we perceived a slight ebullition of the surface, as if the sooty liquid were being agitated from within by some submerged animal or other entity. This ebullition increased rapidly, the center swelled as if with the action of some powerful yeast, and we watched in utter horror, while an uncouth amorphous head with dull and bulging eyes arose gradually on an ever-lengthening neck, and stared us in the face with primordial malignity. Then two arms — if one could call them arms — likewise arose inch by inch, and we saw that the thing was not, as we had thought, a creature immersed in the liquid, but that the liquid itself had put forth this hideous neck and head, and was now forming these damnable arms, that groped toward us with tentacle-like appendages in lieu of claws or hands!

A fear which we had never experienced even in dreams, of which we had found no hint in our most perilous nocturnal excursions, deprived us of the faculty of speech, but not of movement. We recoiled a few paces from the bowl, and co-incidentally with our steps, the horrible neck and arms continued to lengthen. Then the whole mass of the dark fluid began to rise,

and far more quickly than the *suvana*-juice runs from my pen, it poured over the rim of the basin like a torrent of black quicksilver, taking as it reached the floor an undulant ophidian form which immediately developed more than a dozen short legs.

What unimaginable horror of protoplasmic life, what loathly spawn of the primordial slime had come forth to confront us, we did not pause to consider or conjecture. The monstrosity was too awful to permit of even a brief contemplation; also, its intentions were too plainly hostile, and it gave evidence of anthropophagic inclinations; for it slithered toward us with an unbelievable speed and celerity of motion, opening as it came a toothless mouth of amazing capacity. As it gaped upon us, revealing a tongue that uncoiled like a long serpent, its jaws widened with the same extreme elasticity that accompanied all its other movements. We saw that our departure from the fane of Tsathoggua had become most imperative, and turning our backs to all the abominations of that unhallowed shrine, we crossed the sill with a single leap, and ran headlong in the moonlight through the suburbs of Commorion. We rounded every convenient corner, we doubled upon our tracks behind the palaces of time-forgotten nobles and the ware-houses of unrecorded merchants, we chose preferably the places where the incursive jungle trees were highest and thickest; and at last, on a by-road where the outlying houses were no longer visible, we paused and dared to look back.

Our lungs were intolerably strained, were ready to burst with their heroic effort, and the various fatigues of the day had told upon us all too grievously; but when we saw at our heels the black monster, following us with a serpentine and undulating ease, like a torrent that descends a long declivity, our flagging limbs were miraculously re-animated, and we plunged from the betraying light of the by-road into the pathless jungle,

hoping to evade our pursuer in the labyrinth of boles and vines and gigantic leaves. We stumbled over roots and fallen trees, we tore our raiment and lacerated our skins on the savage brambles, we collided in the gloom with huge trunks and limber saplings that bent before us, we heard the hissing of tree-snakes that spat their venom at us from the boughs above, and the grunting or howling of unseen animals when we trod upon them in our precipitate flight. But we no longer dared to stop or look behind.

We must have continued our headlong peregrinations for hours. The moon, which had given us little light at best through the heavy leafage, fell lower and lower among the enormous-fronded palms and intricate creepers. But its final rays, when it sank, were all that saved us from a noisome marsh with mounds and hassocks of bog-concealing grass, amid whose perilous environs and along whose mephitic rim we were compelled to run without pause or hesitation or time to choose our footing, with our damnable pursuer dogging every step.

Now, when the moon had gone down, our flight became wilder and more hazardous — a veritable delirium of terror, exhaustion, confusion, and desperate difficult progression among obstacles to which we gave no longer any distinct heed or comprehension, through a night that clung to us and clogged us like an evil load, like the toils of a monstrous web. It would seem that the creature behind us, with its unbelievable facilities of motion and self-elongation, could have overtaken us at any time; but apparently it desired to prolong the game. And so, in a semi-eternal protraction of inconclusive horrors, the night wore on... But we never dared to stop or look back.

Far-off and wan, a glimmering twilight grew among the trees — a foreomening of the hidden morn. Wearier than the dead, and longing for any repose, any security, even that of some indiscernible tomb, we ran toward

the light, and stumbled forth from the jungle upon a paven street among marble and granite buildings. Dimly, dully, beneath the crushing of our fatigue, we realized that we had wandered in a circle and had come back to the suburbs of Commorion. Before us, no farther away than the toss of a javelin, was the dark temple of Tsathoggua.

Again we ventured to look back, and saw the elastic monster, whose legs had now lengthened till it towered above us, and whose maw was wide enough to have swallowed us both at a mouthful. It followed us with an effortless glide, with a surety of motion and intention too horrible, too cynical to be borne. We ran into the temple of Tsathoggua, whose door was still open just as we had left it, and closing the door behind us with a fearful immediacy, we contrived, in the superhuman strength of our desperation, to shoot one of the rusty bolts.

Now, while the chill dreariness of the dawn fell down in narrow shafts through the windows high in the wall, we tried with a truly heroic resignation to compose ourselves, and waited for whatever our destiny should bring. And while we waited, the god Tsathoggua peered upon us with an even more imbecile squatness and vileness and bestiality than he had shown in the torchlight.

I think I have said that the lintel of the door had crumbled and splintered away in several places. In fact, the beginning process of ruin had made three apertures, through which the daylight now filtered, and which were large enough to have permitted the passage of small animals or sizable serpents. For some reason, our eyes were drawn to these apertures.

We had not gazed long, when the light was suddenly intercepted in all three openings, and then a black material began to pour through them and ran down the door in a triple stream to the flagstones, where it re-united and resumed the form of the thing that had followed us.

“Farewell, Tirouv Ompallios,” I cried, with such remaining breath as I could summon. Then I ran and concealed myself behind the image of Tsathoggua, which was large enough to screen me from view, but, unfortunately, was too small to serve this purpose for more than one person. Tirouv Ompallios would have preceded me with the same laudable idea of self-preservation, but I was the quicker. And seeing that there was not room for both of us to the rearward of Tsathoggua, he returned my valediction and climbed into the great bronze basin, which alone could now afford a moment’s concealment in the bareness of the fane.

Peering from behind that execrable god, whose one merit was the width of his abdomen and his haunches, I observed the actions of the monster. No sooner had Tirouv Ompallios crouched down in the three-legged bowl, when the nameless enormity reared itself up like a sooty pillar and approached the basin. The head had now changed in form and position, till it was no more than a vague imprint of features on the middle of a body without arms, legs or neck. The thing loomed above the brim for an instant, gathering all its bulk in an imminent mass on a sort of tapering tail, and then like a lapsing wave it fell into the bowl upon Tirouv Ompallios. Its whole body seemed to open and form an immense mouth as it sank down from sight.

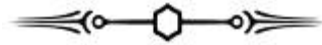
Hardly able to breathe in my horror, I waited, but no sound and no movement came from the basin — not even a groan from Tirouv Ompallios. Finally, with infinite slowness and trepidation and caution, I ventured to emerge from behind Tsathoggua, and passing the bowl on tip-toe, I managed to reach the door.

Now, in order to win my freedom, it would be necessary to draw back the bolt and open the door. And this I greatly feared to do because of the inevitable noise. I felt that it would be highly injudicious to disturb the

entity in the bowl while it was digesting Tirouv Ompallios; but there seemed to be no other way if I was ever to leave that abominable fane.

Even as I shot back the bolt, a single tentacle sprang out with infernal rapidity from the basin, and elongating itself across the whole room, it caught my right wrist in a lethal clutch. It was unlike anything I have ever touched, it was indescribably viscid and slimy and cold, it was loathsomely soft like the foul mire of a bog and mordantly sharp as an edged metal, with an agonizing suction and constriction that made me scream aloud as the clutch tightened upon my flesh, cutting into me like a vise of knife-blades. In my struggles to free myself, I drew the door open, and fell forward on the sill. A moment of awful pain, and then I became aware that I had broken away from my captor. But looking down, I saw that my hand was gone, leaving a strangely withered stump from which little blood issued. Then, gazing behind me into the shrine, I saw the tentacle recoil and shorten till it passed from view behind the rim of the basin, bearing my lost hand to join whatever now remained of Tirouv Ompallios.

The Door to Saturn



WHEN MORGHI, THE high priest of the goddess Yhoundeh, together with twelve of his most ferocious and efficient underlings, came at morning twilight to seek the infamous heretic, Eibon, in his house of black gneiss on a headland above the northern main, they were surprised as well as disappointed to find him absent.

Their surprise was due to the fact that they had every intention of taking him unawares; for all their plots against Eibon had been carried on with meticulous privacy in underground vaults with sound-proof bolted doors; and they themselves had made the long journey to his house in a single night, immediately following the hour of his condemnation. They were disappointed because the formidable writ of arrest, with symbolic flame-etched runes on a scroll of human skin, was now useless and because there seemed to be no early prospect of trying out the ingenious agonies, the intricately harrowing ordeals which they had devised for Eibon with such care.

Morghi was especially disappointed; and the malisons which he muttered when the emptiness of the topmost room had revealed itself, were of truly cabalistic length and fearfulness. Eibon was his chief rival in wizardry, and was acquiring altogether too much fame and prestige among the peoples of Mhu Thulan, that ultimate peninsula of the Hyperborean continent. So Morghi had been glad to believe certain malignant rumors concerning Eibon and to utilize them in the charges he had preferred.

These rumors were, that Eibon was a devotee of the long discredited heathen god, Zhothaquah, whose worship was incalculably older than man; and that Eibon's magic was drawn from his unlawful affiliation with this dark deity, who had come down by way of other worlds from a foreign universe, in primeval times when the earth was still no more than a steaming morass. The power of Zhothaquah was still feared; and it was said that those who were willing to forego their humanity by serving him would become the heritors of antemundane secrets, and the masters of a knowledge so awful that it could only have been brought from outlying planets coeval with night and chaos.

The house of Eibon was built in the form of a pentagonal tower and possessed five stories, including the two that were underground. All, of course, had been searched with painstaking thoroughness; and the three servants of Eibon had been tortured with a slow drip of boiling-hot asphaltum to make them reveal their master's whereabouts. Their continued denial of all knowledge, after a half hour of this, was taken as proof that they were genuinely ignorant.

No sign of a subterranean passage was unearthed by delving in the walls and floor of the lower rooms; though Morghi had even gone so far as to remove the flagstones beneath an obscene image of Zhothaquah which occupied the nethermost. This he had done with extreme reluctance, for the squat, fur-covered god with his bat-like features and sloth-like body, was fearsomely abhorrent to the high priest of the elk-goddess, Yhoundeh.

Returning in renewed search to the highest room of Eibon's tower, the inquisitors were compelled to own themselves baffled. There was nothing to be found but a few articles of furniture, some antique volumes on conjuration such as might be owned by any sorcerer, some disagreeable and gruesome paintings on rolls of pterodactyl parchment, and certain primitive

urns and sculptures and totem-poles of the sort that Eibon had been so fond of collecting. Zhothaquah, in one form or another, was represented in most of these: his face even leered with a bestial somnolence from the urn-handles; and he was to be found in half the totems (which were those of sub-human tribes) along with the seal, the mammoth, the giant tiger, and the aurochs. Morghi felt that the charges against Eibon were now substantiated beyond all remaining doubt, for surely no one who was not a worshipper of Zhothaquah would care to own even a single representation of this loathsome entity.

However, such additional evidence of guilt, no matter how significant or damnatory, was of small help in finding Eibon. Staring from the windows of the topmost chamber, where the walls fell sheer to the cliff and the cliff dropped clear on two sides to a raging sea four hundred feet below, Morghi was driven to credit his rival with superior resources of magic. Otherwise, the man's disappearance was altogether too much of a mystery. And Morghi had no love for mysteries, unless they were part of his own stock-in-trade.

He turned from the window and re-examined the room with minutely careful attention. Eibon had manifestly used it as a sort of study: there was a writing-table of ivory, with reed-pens, and various colored inks in little earthen pots; and there were sheets of paper made from a kind of calamite, all scribbled over with odd astronomical and astrological calculations that caused Morghi to frown because he could not understand them.

On each of the five walls there hung one of the parchment paintings, all of which seemed to be the work of some aboriginal race. Their themes were blasphemous and repellent; and Zhothaquah figured in all of them, amid forms and landscapes whose abnormality and sheer uncouthness may have been due to the half-developed technique of the primitive artists. Morghi

now tore them from the walls one by one, as if he suspected that Eibon might in some manner be concealed behind them.

The walls were now entirely bare; and Morghi considered them for a long time, amid the respectful silence of his underlings. A queer panel, high up in the southeastern side above the writing-table, had been revealed by the removal of one of the paintings. Morghi's heavy brows met in a long black bar as he eyed this panel. It was conspicuously different from the rest of the wall, being an oval-shaped inlay of some reddish metal that was neither gold nor copper — a metal that displayed an obscure and fleeting fluorescence of rare colors when one peered at it through half-shut eyelids. But somehow it was impossible, with open eyes, even to remember the colors of this fluorescence. Morghi — who, perhaps, was cleverer and more perspicacious than Eibon had given him credit for being — conceived a suspicion that was apparently baseless and absurd, since the wall containing the panel was the outer wall of the building, and could give only on the sky and sea.

He climbed upon the writing-table and struck the panel with his fist. The sensations which he felt, and the result of the blow, were alike astounding. A sense of icy cold so extreme that it was hardly distinguishable from extreme heat, ran along his hand and arm through his whole body as he smote the unknown reddish metal. And the panel itself swung easily outward, as if on unseen hinges, with a high sonorous clang that seemed to fall from an incomputable distance. Beyond it, Morghi saw that there was neither sky nor sea nor, in fact, anything he had ever seen or heard of, or even dreamed of in his most outrageous nightmares...

He turned to his companions. The look on his face was half amazement, half triumph.

“Wait here till I return,” he commanded, and leaped headlong through the open panel.

The charges that had been brought against Eibon were indeed true. The sagacious wizard, in his lifelong study of laws and agencies, both natural and supernatural, had taken account of the myths that were prevalent in Mhu Thulan regarding Zhothaquah, and had thought it conceivably worth while to make a personal investigation of this obscure pre-human entity.

He had cultivated the acquaintance of Zhothaquah, who, in the desuetude of his worship, was now driven to lead an existence wholly subterranean; he had offered the prescribed prayers, had made the sacrifices that were most acceptable; and the strange, sleepy little god, in return for Eibon’s interest and his devotion, had confided to him certain information that was more than useful in the practise of the black arts. Also he had presented Eibon with some autobiographical data that confirmed the popular legends in more explicit detail. For reasons which he did not specify, he had come to Earth in former aeons from the planet Cykranosh (the name by which Saturn was called in Mhu Thulan); and Cykranosh itself had been merely a waystation in his travels from remoter worlds and systems.

As a special reward, after years of service and burnt offerings, he presented to Eibon a large thin oval plate of some ultra-telluric metal, instructing him to have it fitted as a hinged panel in an upper room of his house. The panel, if swung outward from the wall on open air, would have the peculiar property of giving admittance to the world Cykranosh, many million miles away in space.

According to the vague and somewhat unsatisfactory explanation vouchsafed by the god, this panel, being partly wrought from a kind of matter which belonged to another universe than man’s, possessed

uncommon radiative properties that served to ally it with some higher dimension of space, through which the distance to astronomically remote spheres was a mere step.

Zhothaquah, however, warned Eibon not to make use of the panel unless in time of extreme need, as a means of escape from otherwise inevitable danger; for it would be difficult if not impossible to return to Earth from Cykranosh — a world where Eibon might find it anything but easy to acclimate himself, since the conditions of life were very different from those in Mhu Thulan, even though they did not involve so total an inversion of all terrene standards and norms as that which prevailed in the more outlying planets.

Some of Zhothaquah's relatives were still resident in Cykranosh and were worshipped by its peoples; and Zhothaquah told Eibon the almost unpronounceable name of the most powerful of these deities, saying that it would be useful to him as a sort of password if he should ever need to visit Cykranosh.

The idea of a panel that would open on some remote world impressed Eibon as being rather fantastic, not to say far-fetched; but he had found Zhothaquah to be in all ways and at all times a most veracious deity. However, he made no trial of the panel's unique virtues, till Zhothaquah (who maintained a close surveillance of all underground doings) had warned him of the machinations of Morghi and the processes of ecclesiastic law that were being instituted in the vaults below the temple of Yhoundeh.

Knowing as he did the power of these jealous bigots, Eibon decided that it would be injudicious to the point of folly if he were to let himself fall into their hands. Bidding a short and grateful farewell to Zhothaquah, and collecting a small parcel of bread and meat and wine, he retired to his study and climbed upon the writing-table. Then, putting aside the crude picture of

a scene in Cykranosh with which Zhothaquah had inspired some primeval half-human artist, he pushed open the panel it had served to conceal.

Eibon saw that Zhothaquah was indeed a god of his word: for the scene beyond the panel was nothing that could ever find a legitimate place in the topography of Mhu Thulan or of any terrestrial region. It did not altogether appeal to him; but there was no alternative, save the inquisitorial cells of the goddess Yhoundeh. Envisaging in thought the various refinements and complications of torture which Morghi would have now prepared, he sprang through the opening into Cykranosh with an agility that was quite juvenile for a wizard of mature years.

It was only a step; but turning he saw that all trace of the panel or of his dwelling had now disappeared. He was standing on a long declivity of ashen soil, down which a sluggish stream that was not water, but some liquescent metal resembling mercury, ran from tremendous unscalable shoulders and horns of the mountain heights above, to debouch in a hill-surrounded lake of the same liquid.

The slope beneath him was lined with rows of peculiar objects; and he could not make up his mind whether they were trees, mineral forms, or animal organisms, since they appeared to combine certain characteristics of all these. This preternatural landscape was appallingly distinct in every detail, under a greenish-black sky that was overarched from end to end with a triple cyclopean ring of dazzling luminosity. The air was cold, and Eibon did not care for its sulphurescent odor or the odd puckery sensation it left in his nostrils and lungs. And when he took a few steps on the unattractive-looking soil, he found that it had the disconcerting friability of ashes that have dried once more after being wetted with rain.

He started down the slope, half-fearing that some of the equivocal objects around him would reach out their mineral boughs or arms to arrest

his progress. They seemed to be a kind of bluish-purple obsidian cacti, with limbs that ended in formidable talon-like spines, and heads that were altogether too elaborate for either fruits or blossoms. They did not move as he passed among them; but he heard a faint and singular tinkling with many modulations of tone, that preceded and followed him along the slope. Eibon conceived the uncomfortable notion that they were holding converse with each other; and were perhaps debating what should be done with him or about him.

However, he reached without mishap or hindrance the end of the declivity, where terraces and ledges of decomposing trap, like a mighty stairway of elder aeons, had rimmed the sunken lake of liquescent metal. Wondering as to the way he should now take, Eibon stood irresolute on one of the ledges.

His train of conjecture was broken by a shadow that fell suddenly athwart him and lay like a monstrous blot on the crumbling stone at his feet. He was not prepossessed by the shadow: it was outrageously defiant of all known esthetic standards; and its malformation and distortion were no less than extravagant.

He turned to see what manner of creature had flung the shadow. This being, he perceived, was not easy to classify, with its ludicrously short legs, its exceedingly elongated arms, and its round, sleepy-looking head that was pendulous from a spherical body, as if it were turning a somnambulistic somersault. But after he had studied it a while and had noted its furriness and somnolent expression, he began to see a vague though inverted likeness to the god Zhothaquah. And remembering how Zhothaquah had said the form assumed by himself on Earth was not altogether that which he had worn in Cykranosh, Eibon now wondered if this entity was one of Zhothaquah's relatives.

He was trying to recall the almost inarticulable name that had been confided to him by the god as a sort of password, when the owner of that unusual shadow, without seeming to note Eibon's presence, began a descent of the terraces and ledges toward the lake. Its locomotion was mainly on its hands, for the absurd legs were not half long enough for the steps it had to take.

Arriving at the lake-edge, the creature drank of the liquid metal in a hearty and copious manner that served to convince Eibon of its godship; for surely no being of an inferior biologic order would quench its thirst with a beverage so extraordinary. Then, re-ascending to the ledge where Eibon stood, it paused and appeared to notice him for the first time.

Eibon had finally remembered the outlandish name for which he was groping.

"Hziulquoigmnzhah," he sought to articulate. Doubtless the result was not wholly conformable to Cykranoshian rules; but Eibon did the best he could with the vocal organs at his command. His auditor seemed to recognize the word, for it peered at Eibon a little less sleepily than before, with its inversely situated eyes; and even deigned to utter something which sounded like an attempt to correct his pronunciation. Eibon wondered how he was ever to learn such a language; or, having learned it, how he was ever to pronounce it. However, it heartened him a little to find that he was understood at all.

"Zhothaqquah," he said, repeating the name three times in his most orotund incantatory manner.

The topsy-turvy being opened its eyes a trifle more, and again admonished him, uttering the word Zhothaqquah with an indescribable abbreviation of vowels and thickening of consonants. Then it stood regarding him for a while as if in doubt or cogitation. Finally it raised one

of its ell-long arms from the ground and pointed along the shore, where the mouth of a low valley was discernible among the hills. It said distinctly the enigmatic words: “Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh,” and then, while the sorcerer was pondering the significance of this unusual locution, it turned away from him and started to re-ascend the higher steps, toward a rather spacious cavern with columned opening, that he had not heretofore perceived. It had hardly passed from sight into the cavern, when Eibon was greeted by the high priest, Morghi, who had readily followed him by his tracks in the ashen soil.

“Detestable sorcerer! Abominable heretic! I arrest you!” said Morghi with pontifical severity.

Eibon was surprised, not to say startled; but it reassured him to see that Morghi was alone. He drew the sword of highly tempered bronze which he carried, and smiled.

“I should advise you to moderate your language, Morghi,” he admonished. “Also, your idea of arresting me is slightly out of place now, since we are alone together in Cykranosh, and Mhu Thulan and the temple-cells of Yhoundeh are many million miles away.”

Morghi did not appear to relish this information. He scowled and muttered: “I suppose this is some more of your damnable wizardry.”

Eibon chose to ignore the insinuation.

“I have been conversing with one of the gods of Cykranosh,” he said magniloquently. “The god, whose name is Hziulquoigmnzhah, has given me a mission to perform, a message to deliver, and has indicated the direction in which I should go. I suggest that you lay aside our little mundane disagreement, and accompany me. Of course we could slit each other’s throats or eviscerate each other, since we are both armed. But under the circumstances I think you will see the puerility, not to mention the sheer inutility, of such a proceeding. If we both live we may be of mutual use and

assistance, in a strange world whose problems and difficulties, if I mistake not, are worthy of our united powers.”

Morghi frowned and pondered.

“Very well,” he said grudgingly, “I consent. But I warn you that matters will have to take their course when we return to Mhu Thulan.”

“That,” rejoined Eibon, “is a contingency which need not trouble either of us. Shall we start?”

The two Hyperboreans had been following a defile that wound away from the lake of fluid metal among hills whose vegetation thickened and grew more various as their height decreased. It was the valley that had been indicated to the sorcerer by the topsy-turvy biped. Morghi, a natural inquisitor in all senses, was plying Eibon with questions.

“Who, or what, was the singular entity that disappeared in a cavern just before I accosted you?”

“That was the god Hziulquoigmnzhah.”

“And who, pray, is this god? I confess that I have never heard of him.”

“He is the paternal uncle of Zhothaquah.”

Morghi was silent, except for a queer sound that might have been either an interrupted sneeze or an exclamation of disgust. But after a while he asked:

“And what is this mission of yours?”

“That will be revealed in due time,” answered Eibon with sententious dignity. “I am not allowed to discuss it at present. I have a message from the god which I must deliver only to the proper persons.”

Morghi was unwillingly impressed.

“Well, I suppose you know what you are doing and where you are going. Can you give me any hint as to our destination?”

“That, too, will be revealed in due time.”

The hills were lapsing gently to a well-wooded plain whose flora would have been the despair of Earthly botanists. Beyond the last hill, Eibon and Morghi came to a narrow road that began abruptly and stretched away in the distance. Eibon took the road without hesitation. Indeed there was little else to do, for the thickets of mineral plants and trees were rapidly becoming impenetrable. They lined the way with serrate branches that were like sheaves of darts and daggers, of sword-blades and needles.

Eibon and Morghi soon noticed that the road was full of large footprints, all of them circular in form and rimmed about with the marks of protruding claws. However, they did not communicate their misgivings to each other.

After an hour or two of progress along the yielding ashy thoroughfare, amid the vegetation that was more horrent than ever with knives and caltrops, the travelers began to remember that they were hungry. Morghi, in his haste to arrest Eibon, had not breakfasted; and Eibon, in his natural hurry to evade Morghi, had committed a like omission. They halted by the wayside, and the sorcerer shared his parcel of food and wine with the priest. They ate and drank with frugality, however, since the supply was limited, and the landscape about them was not likely to yield any viands that were suitable for human sustenance.

With strength and courage revived by this little refecton, they continued their journey. They had not gone far when they overtook a remarkable monster that was plainly the originator of the numerous footprints. It was squatting down with its armored haunches toward the travelers, filling the whole road for an indeterminable distance ahead. They could see that it was possessed of a myriad of short legs; but they could form no idea of what its head and forequarters were like.

Eibon and Morghi were much dismayed.

“Is this another of your ‘gods’?” asked Morghi ironically.

The sorcerer did not reply. But he realized that he had a reputation to sustain. He went boldly forward and cried out: “Hziulquoigmnzhah” in the most resonant bellow that he could summon. At the same time he drew his sword and thrust it between two plates of the horny mail that covered the monster’s hindquarters.

Greatly to his relief, the animal began to move and resumed its march along the road. The Hyperboreans followed it; and whenever the creature slackened its pace Eibon would repeat the formula which he had found so effective. Morghi was compelled to regard him with a certain awe.

They traveled on in this manner for several hours. The great luminous triple ring still over-arched the zenith, but a strangely small and chilly sun had now intersected the ring and was declining toward the west of Cykranosh. The forest along the way was still a high wall of sharp metallic foliage; but other roads and paths and byways were now branching off from the one that the monster followed.

All was very silent, except for the many-footed shuffling of this uncouth animal; and neither Eibon nor Morghi had spoken for miles. The high priest was regretting more and more his rashness in pursuing Eibon through the panel; and Eibon was wishing that Zhothaquah had given him the entrée to a different sort of world. They were startled out of their meditations by a sudden clamor of deep and booming voices that rose from somewhere in advance of the monster. It was a veritable pandemonium of unhuman guttural bellowings and croakings, with notes that were somehow suggestive of reproof and adjuration, like shrewish drums, as if the monster were being scolded by a group of unimaginable entities.

“Well?” queried Morghi.

“All that we are destined to behold will reveal itself at the proper time,” said Eibon.

The forest was thinning rapidly, and the clamor of termagant bellows was drawing closer. Still following the hindquarters of their multipedal guide, which was crawling on with reluctant slowness, the travelers emerged in an open space and beheld a most singular tableau. The monster, which was plainly of a tame and harmless and stupid sort, was cowering before a knot of beings no larger than men, who were armed only with long-handled goads.

These beings, though they were bipeds, and were not quite so unheard-of in their anatomic structure as the entity which Eibon had met by the lake, were nevertheless sufficiently unusual; for their head and bodies were apparently combined in one, and their ears, eyes, nostrils, mouths, and certain other organs of doubtful use were all arranged in a somewhat unconventional grouping on their chests and abdomens. They were wholly naked, and were rather dark in color, with no trace of hair on any part of their bodies. Behind them at a little distance were many edifices of a kind which hardly conformed to human ideas of architectural symmetry.

Eibon strode valorously forward, with Morghi following discreetly. The torso-headed beings ceased their scolding of the fawning monster and peered at the Earth-men with expressions that were difficult to read on account of the odd and baffling relationship of their features.

“Hziulquoigmnzhah! Zhothaquah!” said Eibon with oracular solemnity and sonority. Then, after a pause of hieratic length: “Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh!”

The result was indeed gratifying, and was all that could be expected even from a formula so remarkable; for the Cykranoshian beings dropped their goads and bowed before the sorcerer till their featured bosoms almost touched the ground.

“I have performed the mission, I have delivered the message given me by Hziulquoigmnzah,” said Eibon to Morghi.

For several Cykranoshian months the two Hyperboreans were the honored guests of the quaint and worthy and virtuous people, who called themselves the Bhlemphroims. Eibon had a real gift for languages and made progress in the local tongue far more readily than Morghi. His knowledge of the customs, manners, ideas, and beliefs of the Bhlemphroims soon became extensive; but he found it a source of disillusionment as well as of illumination.

The armored monster that he and Morghi had driven before them so valiantly was, he learned, a domestic beast of burden that had strayed away from its owners amid the mineral vegetation of the desert lands adjoining Vhlorrh, the chief town of the Bhlemphroims. The genuflections with which Eibon and Morghi had been greeted were only an expression of gratitude for the safe return of this beast; and were not, as Eibon had thought, an acknowledgment of the divine names he had quoted and the fearsome phrase, “Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh.”

The being that Eibon had met by the lake was indeed the god Hziulquoigmnzah; and there were dim traditions of Zhothaquah in certain early myths of the Bhlemphroims. But this people, it seemed, were most regrettably materialistic and had long ceased to offer sacrifice and prayer to the gods; though they spoke of them with a sort of distant respect and with no actual blasphemy.

Eibon learned that the words “Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh” doubtless belonged to a private language of the gods, which the Bhlemphroims no longer understood; but which, however, was still studied by a neighboring people, the Ydheems, who maintained the ancient formal worship of Hziulquoigmnzah and various related deities.

The Bhlemphroims were indeed a practical race, and had few if any interests beyond the cultivation of a great variety of edible fungi, the breeding of large centipedal animals, and the propagation of their own species. The latter process, as revealed to Eibon and Morghi, was somewhat unusual: though the Bhlemphroims were bisexual, only one female in a generation was chosen for reproductive duties; and this female, after growing to mammoth size on food prepared from a special fungus, became the mother of an entire new generation.

When they had been well initiated into the life and customs of Vhlorrh, the Hyperboreans were privileged to see the future national mother, called the Djhenquomh, who had now attained the requisite proportions after years of scientific nourishment. She lived in an edifice that was necessarily larger than any of the other buildings in Vhlorrh; and her sole activity was the consumption of immense quantities of food. The sorcerer and the inquisitor were impressed, even if not captivated, by the mountainous amplitude of her charms and by their highly novel arrangement. They were told that the male parent (or parents) of the forthcoming generation had not yet been selected.

The possession of separate heads by the Hyperboreans seemed to lend them a remarkable biologic interest in the eyes of their hosts. The Bhlemphroims, it was learned, had not always been headless but had reached their present physical conformation through a slow process of evolution, in which the head of the archetypal Bhlemphroim had been merged by imperceptible degrees with the torso.

But, unlike most peoples, they did not regard their current stage of development with unqualified complacency. Indeed, their headlessness was a source of national regret; they deplored the retrenchment of nature in this regard; and the arrival of Eibon and Morghi, who were looked upon as ideal

exemplars of cephalic evolution, had served to quicken their eugenic sorrow.

The sorcerer and the inquisitor, on their part, found life rather dull among the Bhlemphroims after the first feeling of exoticism had worn off. The diet was tiresome for one thing — an endless succession of raw and boiled and roasted mushrooms, varied at rare intervals by the coarse and flabby meat of tame monsters. And this people, though they were always polite and respectful, did not seem to be greatly awed by the exhibitions of Hyperborean magic with which Eibon and Morghi favored them; and their lamentable want of religious ardor made all evangelistic endeavor a thankless task. And, being fundamentally unimaginative, they were not even duly impressed by the fact that their visitors had come from a remote ultra-Cykranoshian world.

“I feel,” said Eibon to Morghi one day, “that the god was sadly mistaken in deigning to send this people a message of any sort.”

It was very soon after this that a large committee of the Blemphroims waited upon Eibon and Morghi and informed them that after long consideration they had been selected as the fathers of the next generation and were to be married forthwith to the tribal mother in the hope that a well-headed race of Bhlemphroims would result from the union.

Eibon and Morghi were quite overcome by the proposed eugenic honor. Thinking of the mountainous female they had seen, Morghi was prone to remember his sacerdotal vows of celibacy and Eibon was eager to take similar vows upon himself without delay. The inquisitor, indeed, was so overwhelmed as to be rendered almost speechless; but, with rare presence of mind, the sorcerer temporized by making a few queries anent the legal and social status which would be enjoyed by Morghi and himself as the husbands of the Djhenquomh. And the naive Blemphroims told him that this

would be a matter of brief concern; that after completing their marital duties the husbands were always served to the national mother in the form of ragouts and other culinary preparations.

The Hyperboreans tried to conceal from their hosts the reluctance with which they both regarded the coming honor in all its stages. Being as usual a master of diplomatics, Eibon went so far as to make a formal acceptance on behalf of himself and his companion. But when the delegation of Bhlemphroims had departed he said to Morghi:

“I am more than ever convinced that the god was mistaken. We must leave the city of Vhlorrh with all feasible dispatch, and continue our journey till we find a people who are worthier to receive his communication.”

Apparently it had never occurred to the simple and patriotic Bhlemphroims that the fathering of the next national litter was a privilege that anyone would dream of rejecting. Eibon and Morghi were subjected to no manner of duress or constraint, and their movements were not even watched. It was an easy matter to leave the house in which they had been domiciled, when the rumbling snores of their hosts were ascending to the great ring of Cykranoshian moons, and to follow the highway that led from Vhlorrh toward the country of Ydheems.

The road before them was well marked; and the ringlight was almost as clear and brilliant as full day. They traveled a long distance through the diversified and always unique scenery which it served to illumine, before the rising of the sun and the consequent discovery of their departure by the Bhlemphroims. These single-minded bipeds, it is likely, were too sorely perplexed and dumbfounded by the loss of the guests whom they had chosen as future progenitors to even think of following them.

The land of the Ydheems (as indicated on an earlier occasion by the Bhlemphroims) was many leagues away; and tracts of ashen deserts, of

mineral cacti, of fungoid forests, and high mountains intervened. The boundary of the Bhlemphroims — marked by a crude sculpturesque representation of the tribal mother beside the way — was passed by the travelers before dawn.

And during the following day they journeyed among more than one of those unusual races who diversify so widely the population of Saturn. They saw the Djhibbis, that apterous and Stylitean bird-people who roost on their individual dolomites for years at a time and meditate upon the cosmos, uttering to each other at long intervals the mystic syllables yop, yeep, and yoop, which are said to express an unfathomed range of esoteric thought.

And they met those flibbertigibbet pygmies, the Ephiqhs, who hollow out their homes in the trunks of certain large fungi, and are always having to hunt new habitations because the old ones crumble into powder in a few days. And they heard the underground croaking of that mysterious people, the Ghlongs, who dread not only the sunlight but also the ring-light, and who have never yet been seen by any of the surface-dwellers.

By sunset, however, Eibon and Morghi had crossed the domains of all the aforementioned races, and had even climbed the lower scarps of those mountains which still divided them from the land of Ydheems. Here, on a sheltered ledge, their weariness impelled them to halt; and since they had now ceased to dread pursuit from the Blemphroims, they wrapped themselves more tightly in their mantles against the cold, after a meager supper of raw mushrooms, and fell asleep.

Their slumber was disturbed by a series of cacodemoniacal dreams in which they both thought they had been recaptured by the Bhlemphroims and were forced to espouse the Djhenquomh. They awoke shortly before dawn from visions whose details were excruciatingly vivid, and were more than ready to resume their ascent of the mountains.

The slopes and cliffs above them were desolate enough to have deterred any travelers of inferior hardihood or less cogent fears. The tall woods of fungi dwindled ere long to tiny growths, and soon they lessened to forms that were no bigger than lichens; and after these, there was nothing but black and naked stone. The wiry and slender Eibon suffered no great inconvenience from the climb; but Morghi, with his sacerdotal girth and bulk, was soon winded. Whenever he paused to recover his breath, Eibon would say to him: "Think of the national mother," and Morghi would climb the next acclivity like an agile but somewhat asthmatic mountain-sheep.

They came at noon to a pinnacle-guarded pass from which they could look down on the country of the Ydheems. They saw that it was a broad and fertile realm, with woods of mammoth mushrooms and other thallophytes that excelled in size and number those of any other region they had yet traversed. Even the mountain-slopes were more fruitful on this side, for Eibon and Morghi had not descended far when they entered a grove of enormous puff-balls and toadstools.

They were admiring the magnitude and variety of these growths, when they heard a thunderous noise on the mountains above them. The noise drew nearer, gathering to itself the roar of new thunders. Eibon would have prayed to Zhothaquah, and Morghi would have supplicated the goddess Yhoundeh, but unfortunately there was no time. They were caught in a mighty mass of rolling puff-balls and toppling toadstools overthrown by the huge avalanche that had started on the heights above; and, borne with increasing momentum, with vertiginous speed and tumult amid an ever-growing heap of shattered fungi, they finished their descent of the mountain in less than a minute.

Endeavoring to extricate themselves from the pile of thallophytic debris in which they were buried, Eibon and Morghi noticed that there still seemed

to be a good deal of noise, even though the avalanche had stopped. Also, there were other movements and heavings than their own in the pile. When they had managed to get their necks and shoulders clear, they discovered that the commotion was being made by certain people who differed from their late hosts, the Bhlemphroims, in that they possessed rudimentary heads.

These people were some of the Ydheems, on one of whose towns the avalanche had descended. Roofs and towers were beginning to emerge from the mass of boulders and puff-balls; and just in front of the Hyperboreans there was a large temple-like edifice from whose blocked-up door a multitude of the Ydheems had now tunneled their way. At sight of Eibon and Morghi they suspended their labors; and the sorcerer, who had freed himself and had made sure that all his bones and members were intact, now took the opportunity to address them.

“Harken!” he said with great importance. “I have come to bring you a message from the god Hziulquoigmnzhah. I have borne it faithfully on ways beset with many hazards and perils. In the god’s own divine language, it runs thus: ‘Iqhui dlosh odhqfonqh.’”

Since he spoke in the dialect of the Bhlemphroims, which differed somewhat from their own, it is doubtful if the Ydheems altogether understood the first part of his utterance. But Hziulquoigmnzhah was their tutelary deity, and they knew the language of the gods. At the words: “Iqhui dlosh odhqfonqh,” there was a most remarkable resumption and increase of activity, a ceaseless running to and fro on the part of the Ydheems, a shouting of guttural orders, and a recrudescence of new heads and limbs from the avalanche.

Those who had issued from the temple re-entered it, and came out once more carrying a huge image of Hziulquoigmnzhah, some smaller icons of

lesser though allied deities, and a very ancient-looking idol which both Eibon and Morghi recognized as having a resemblance to Zhothaquah. Others of the Ydheems brought their household goods and furniture forth from the dwellings, and, signing the Hyperboreans to accompany them, the whole populace began to evacuate the town.

Eibon and Morghi were much mystified. And it was not until a new town had been built on the fungus-wooded plain at the distance of a full day's march, and they themselves had been installed among the priests of the new temple, that they learned the reason of it all and the meaning of: "Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh." These words meant merely: "Be on your way," and the god had addressed them to Eibon as a dismissal. But the coincidental coming of the avalanche and of Eibon and Morghi with this purported message from the god, had been taken by the Ydheems as a divine injunction to remove themselves and their goods from their present location. Thus the wholesale exodus of people with their idols and domestic belongings.

The new town was called Ghlomph, after the one that the avalanche had buried. Here, for the remainder of their days, Eibon and Morghi were held in much honor; and their coming with the message, "Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh," was deemed a fortunate thing, since there were no more avalanches to threaten the security of Ghlomph in its new situation remote from the mountains.

The Hyperboreans shared the increment of civic affluence and well-being resultant from this security. There was no national mother among the Ydheems, who propagated themselves in a far more general manner than the Bhlemphroims, so existence was quite safe and tranquil. Eibon, at least, was really in his element; for the news which he brought of Zhothaquah, who was still worshipped in this region of Cykranosh, had enabled him to

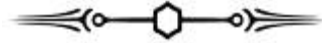
set up as a sort of minor prophet, even apart from the renown which he enjoyed as the bearer of the divine message and as the founder of the new town of Ghlomph.

Morghi, however, was not entirely happy. Though the Ydheems were religious, they did not carry their devotional fervor to the point of bigotry or intolerance; so it was quite impossible to start an inquisition among them. But still there were compensations: the fungus-wine of the Ydheems was potent though evil-tasting; and there were females of a sort, if one were not too squeamish. Consequently, Morghi and Eibon both settled down to an ecclesiastic regimen which, after all, was not so radically different from that of Mhu Thulan or any other place on the planet of their birth.

Such were the various adventures, and such was the final lot of this redoubtable pair in Cykranosh. But in Eibon's tower of black gneiss on that headland of the northern sea in Mhu Thulan, the underlings of Morghi waited for days, neither wishing to follow the high priest through the magic panel nor daring to leave in disobedience of his orders.

At length they were recalled by a special dispensation from the hierophant who had been chosen as Morghi's temporary successor. But the result of the whole affair was highly regrettable from the standpoint of the hierarchy of Yhoundeh. It was universally believed that Eibon had not only escaped by virtue of the powerful magic he had learned from Zhothaquah but had made away with Morghi into the bargain. As a consequence of this belief, the faith of Yhoundeh declined, and there was a widespread revival of the dark worship of Zhothaquah throughout Mhu Thulan in the last century before the onset of the great Ice Age.

The Seven Geases



THE LORD RALIBAR VOOZ, high magistrate of Commorion and third cousin to King Homquat, had gone forth with six-and-twenty of his most valorous retainers in quest of such game as was afforded by the black Eiglophian Mountains. Leaving to lesser sportsmen the great sloths and vampire-bats of the intermediate jungle, as well as the small but noxious dinosauria, Ralibar Vooz and his followers had pushed rapidly ahead and had covered the distance between the Hyperborean capital and their objective in a day's march. The glassy scaurs and grim ramparts of Mount Voormithadreth, highest and most formidable of the Eiglophians, had beetled above them, wedging the sun with dark scoriac peaks at mid-afternoon, and walling the blazonries of sunset wholly from view. They had spent the night beneath its lowermost crags, keeping a ceaseless watch, piling dead branches on their fires, and hearing on the grisly heights above them the wild and dog-like ululations of those subhuman savages, the Voormis for which the mountain was named. Also, they heard the bellowing of an alpine catoblepas pursued by the Voormis, and the mad snarling of a saber-tooth tiger assailed and dragged down; and Ralibar Vooz had deemed that these noises boded well for the morrow's hunting.

He and his men rose betimes; and having breakfasted on their provisions of dried bear-meat and a dark sour wine that was noted for its invigorative qualities, they began immediately the ascent of the mountain, whose upper precipices were hollow with caves occupied by the Voormis. Ralibar Vooz had hunted these creatures before; and a certain room of his house in

Commorion was arrased with their thick and shaggy pelts. They were usually deemed the most dangerous of the Hyperborean fauna; and the mere climbing of Voormithadreth, even without the facing of its inhabitants, would have been a feat attended by more than sufficient peril: but Ralibar Vooz, having tasted of such sport, could now satisfy himself with nothing tamer.

He and his followers were well armed and accoutered. Some of the men bore coils of rope and grapplinghooks to be employed in the escalade of the steeper crags. Some carried heavy crossbows; and many were equipped with long-handled and saber-bladed bills which, from experience, had proved the most effective weapons in close-range fighting with the Voormis. The whole party was variously studded with auxiliary knives, throwing-darts, two-handed simitars, maces, bodkins and saw-toothed axes. The men were all clad in jerkins and hose of dinosaur-leather, and were shod with brazen-spiked buskins. Ralibar Vooz himself wore a light suiting of copper chain-mail, which, flexible as cloth, in no wise impeded his movements. In addition he carried a buckler of mammoth-hide with a long bronze spike in its center that could be used as a thrusting-sword; and, being a man of huge stature and strength, his shoulders and baldric were hung with a whole arsenal of weaponries.

The mountain was of volcanic origin, though its four craters were supposedly all extinct. For hours the climbers toiled upward on the fearsome scarps of black lava and obsidian, seeing the sheerer heights above them recede interminably into a cloudless zenith, as if not to be approached by man. Far faster than they the sun climbed, blazing torridly upon them and heating the rocks till their hands were scorched as if by the walls of a furnace. But Ralibar Vooz, eager to flesh his weapons, would

permit no halting in the shady chasms nor under the scant umbrage of rare junipers.

That day, however, it seemed that the Voormis were not abroad upon Mount Voormithadreth. No doubt they had feasted too well during the night, when their hunting cries had been heard by the Commorians. Perhaps it would be necessary to invade the warren of caves in the loftier crags: a procedure none too palatable even for a sportsman of such hardihood as Ralibar Vooz. Few of these caverns could be reached by men without the use of ropes; and the Voormis, who were possessed of quasi-human cunning, would hurl blocks and rubble upon the heads of the assailants. Most of the caves were narrow and darksome, thus putting at a grave disadvantage the hunters who entered them; and the Voormis would fight redoubtably in defense of their young and their females, who dwelt in the inner recesses; and the females were fiercer and more pernicious, if possible, than the males.

Such matters as these were debated by Ralibar Vooz and his henchmen as the escalade became more arduous and hazardous, and they saw far above them the pitted mouths of the lower dens. Tales were told of brave hunters who had gone into those dens and had not returned; and much was said of the vile feeding-habits of the Voormis and the uses to which their captives were put before death and after it. Also, much was said regarding the genesis of the Voormis, who were popularly believed to be the offspring of women and certain atrocious creatures that had come forth in primal days from a tenebrous cavern-world in the bowels of Voormithadreth. Somewhere beneath that four-coned mountain, the sluggish and baleful god Tsathoggua, who had come down from Saturn in years immediately following the Earth's creation, was fabled to reside; and during the rite of worship at his black altars, the devotees were always careful to orient

themselves toward Voormithadreth. Other and more doubtful beings than Tsathoggua slept below the extinct volcanoes, or ranged and ravened throughout that hidden underworld; but of these beings few men other than the more adept or abandoned wizards, professed to know anything at all.

Ralibar Vooz, who had a thoroughly modern disdain of the supernatural, avowed his skepticism in no equivocal terms when he heard his henchmen regaling each other with these antique legendries. He swore with many ribald blasphemies that there were no gods anywhere, above or under Voormithadreth. As for the Voormis themselves, they were indeed a misbegotten species; but it was hardly necessary, in explaining their generation, to go beyond the familiar laws of nature. They were merely the remnant of a low and degraded tribe of aborigines, who, sinking further into brutehood, had sought refuge in those volcanic fastnesses after the coming of the true Hyperboreans.

Certain grizzled veterans of the party shook their heads and muttered at these heresies; but because of their respect for the high rank and prowess of Ralibar Vooz, they did not venture to gainsay him openly.

After several hours of heroic climbing, the hunters came within measurable distance of those nether caves. Below them now, in a vast and dizzying prospect, were the wooded hills and fair, fertile plains of Hyperborea. They were alone in a world of black, raven rock, with innumerable precipices and chasms above, beneath and on all sides. Directly overhead, in the face of an almost perpendicular cliff, were three of the cavern-mouths, which had the aspect of volcanic fumaroles. Much of the cliff was glazed with obsidian, and there were few ledges or hand-grips. It seemed that even the Voormis, agile as apes, could scarcely climb that wall; and Ralibar Vooz, after studying it with a strategic eye, decided that the only feasible approach to the dens was from above. A diagonal crack,

running from a shelf just below them to the summit, no doubt afforded ingress and egress to their occupants.

First, however, it was necessary to gain the precipice above: a difficult and precarious feat in itself. At one side of the long talus on which the hunters were standing, there was a chimney that wound upward in the wall, ceasing thirty feet from the top and leaving a sheer, smooth surface. Working along the chimney to its upper end, a good alpinist could hurl his rope and grappling-hook to the summit-edge.

The advisability of bettering their present vantage was now emphasized by a shower of stones and offal from the caverns. They noted certain human relics, wellgnawed and decayed, amid the offal. Ralibar Vooz, animated by wrath against these miscreants, as well as by the fervor of the huntsman, led his six-and-twenty followers in the escalade. He soon reached the chimney's termination, where a slanting ledge offered bare foothold at one side. After the third cast, his rope held; and he went up hand over hand to the precipice.

He found himself on a broad and comparatively level-topped buttress of the lowest cone of Voormithadreth, which still rose for two thousand feet above him like a steep pyramid. Before him on the buttress, the black lava-stone was gnarled into numberless low ridges and strange masses like the pedestals of gigantic columns. Dry, scanty grasses and withered alpine flowers grew here and there in shallow basins of darkish soil; and a few cedars, levin-struck or stunted, had taken root in the fissured rock. Amid the black ridges, and seemingly close at hand, a thread of pale smoke ascended, serpentine oddly in the still air of noon and reaching an unbelievable height ere it vanished. Ralibar Vooz inferred that the buttress was inhabited by some person nearer to civilized humanity than the Voormis, who were quite ignorant of the use of fire. Surprised by this discovery, he did not wait

for his men to join him, but started off at once to investigate the source of the curling smoke-thread.

He had deemed it merely a few steps away, behind the first of those grotesque furrows of lava. But evidently he had been deceived in this: for he climbed ridge after ridge and rounded many broad and curious dolmens and great dolomites which rose inexplicably before him where, an instant previous, he had thought there were only ordinary boulders; and still the pale, sinuous wisp went skyward at the same seeming interval.

Ralibar Vooz, high magistrate and redoubtable hunter, was both puzzled and irritated by this behavior of the smoke. Likewise, the aspect of the rocks around him was disconcertingly and unpleasantly deceitful. He was wasting too much time in an exploration idle and quite foreign to the real business of the day; but it was not his nature to abandon any enterprise no matter how trivial, without reaching the set goal. Halloing loudly to his men, who must have climbed the cliff by now, he went on toward the elusive smoke.

It seemed to him, once or twice, that he heard the answering shouts of his followers, very faint and indistinct, as if across some mile-wide chasm. Again he called lustily, but this time there was no audible reply. Going a little farther, he began to detect among the rocks beside him a peculiar conversational droning and muttering in which four or five different voices appeared to take part. Seemingly they were much nearer at hand than the smoke, which had now receded like a mirage. One of the voices was clearly that of a Hyperborean; but the others possessed a timbre and accent which Ralibar Vooz, in spite of his varied ethnic knowledge, could not associate with any branch or subdivision of mankind. They affected his ears in a most unpleasant fashion, suggesting by turns the hum of great insects, the murmurs of fire and water, and the rasping of metal.

Ralibar Vooz emitted a hearty and somewhat ireful bellow to announce his coming to whatever persons were convened amid the rocks. His weapons and accouterments clattering loudly, he scrambled over a sharp lava-ridge toward the voices.

Topping the ridge, he looked down on a scene that was both mysterious and unexpected. Below him, in a circular hollow, there stood a rude hut of boulders and stone fragments roofed with cedar boughs. In front of this hovel, on a large flat block of obsidian, a fire burned with flames alternately blue, green and white; and from it rose the pale, thin spiral of smoke whose situation had illuded him so strangely.

An old man, withered and disreputable-looking, in a robe that appeared no less antique and unsavory than himself, was standing near to the fire. He was not engaged in any visible culinary operations; and, in view of the torrid sun, it hardly seemed that he required the warmth given by the queer-colored blaze. Aside from this individual, Ralibar Vooz looked in vain for the participants of the muttered conversation he had just overheard. He thought there was an evanescent fluttering of dim, grotesque, shadows around the obsidian block; but the shadows faded and vanished in an instant; and, since there were no objects or beings that could have cast them, Ralibar Vooz deemed that he had been victimized by another of those highly disagreeable optic illusions in which that part of the mountain Vormithadreth seemed to abound.

The old man eyed the hunter with a fiery gaze and began to curse him in fluent but somewhat archaic diction as he descended into the hollow. At the same time, a lizard-tailed and sooty-feathered bird, which seemed to belong to some night-flying species of archaeopteryx, began to snap its toothed beak and flap its digitated wings on the objectionably shapen stela that served

it for a perch. This stela, standing on the lee side of the fire and very close to it, had not been perceived by Ralibar Vooz at first glance.

“May the ordure of demons bemire you from heel to crown!” cried the venomous ancient. “O lumbering, bawling idiot! you have ruined a most promising and important evocation. How you came here I cannot imagine. I have surrounded this place with twelve circles of illusion, whose effect is multiplied by their myriad intersections; and the chance that any intruder would ever find his way to my abode was mathematically small and insignificant. Ill was that chance which brought you here: for They that you have frightened away will not return until the high stars repeat a certain rare and quickly passing conjunction; and much wisdom is lost to me in the interim.”

“How now, varlet!” said Ralibar Vooz, astonished and angered by this greeting, of which he understood little save that his presence was unwelcome to the old man. “Who are you that speak so churlishly to a magistrate of Commorion and a cousin to King Homquat? I advise you to curb such insolence: for, if so I wish, it lies in my power to serve you even as I serve the Voormis. Though methinks,” he added, “your pelt is far too filthy and verminous to merit room amid my trophies of the chase.”

“Know that I am the sorcerer Ezdagar,” proclaimed the ancient, his voice echoing among the rocks with dreadful sonority. “By choice I have lived remote from cities and men; nor have the Voormis of the mountain troubled me in my magical seclusion. I care not if you are the magistrate of all swinedom or a cousin to the king of dogs. In retribution for the charm you have shattered, the business you have undone by this oafish trespass, I shall put upon you a most dire and calamitous and bitter geas.”

“You speak in terms of outmoded superstition,” said Ralibar Vooz, who was impressed against his will by the weighty oratorical style in which

Ezdagor had delivered these periods.

The old man seemed not to hear him.

“Harken then to your geas, O Ralibar Vooz,” he fulminated. “For this is the geas, that you must cast aside all your weapons and go unarmed into the dens of the Voormis; and fighting bare-handed against the Voormis and against their females and their young, you must win to that secret cave in the bowels of Voormithadreth, beyond the dens, wherein abides from eldermost eons the god Tsathoggua. You shall know Tsathoggua by his great girth and his batlike furriness and the look of a sleepy black toad which he has eternally. He will rise not from his place, even in the ravening of hunger, but will wait in divine slothfulness for the sacrifice. And, going close to Lord Tsathoggua, you must say to him: ‘I am the blood-offering sent by the sorcerer Ezdagor.’ Then, if it be his pleasure, Tsathoggua will avail himself of the offering.

“In order that you may not go astray, the bird Raphtontis, who is my familiar, will guide you in your wanderings on the mountain-side and through the caverns.” He indicated with a peculiar gesture the night-flying archaeopteryx on the foully symbolic stela, and added as if in afterthought: “Raphtontis will remain with you till the accomplishment of the geas and the end of your journey below Voormithadreth. He knows the secrets of the underworld and the lairing-places of the Old ones. If our Lord Tsathoggoa should disdain the blood-offering, or, in his generosity, should send you on to his brethern, Raphtontis will be fully competent to lead the way whithersoever is ordained by the god.”

Ralibar Vooz found himself unable to answer this more than outrageous peroration in the style which it manifestly deserved. In fact, he could say nothing at all: for it seemed that a sort of lockjaw had afflicted him. Moreover, to his exceeding terror and bewilderment, this vocal paralysis

was accompanied by certain involuntary movements of a most alarming type. With a sense of nightmare compulsion, together with the horror of one who feels that he is going mad, he began to divest himself of the various weapons which he carried. His bladed buckler, his mace, broadsword, hunting-knife, ax and needle-tipped anlace jingled on the ground before the obsidian block.

“I shall permit you to retain your helmet and bodyarmor,” said Ezdagor at this juncture. “Otherwise, I fear that you will not reach Tsathoggua in the state of corporeal intactness proper for a sacrifice. The teeth and nails of the Voormis are sharp, even as their appetites.”

Muttering certain half-inaudible and doubtful-sounding words, the wizard turned from Ralibar Vooz and began to quench the tri-colored fire with a mixture of dust and blood from a shallow brass basin. Deigning to vouchsafe no farewell or sign of dismissal, he kept his back toward the hunter, but waved his left hand obliquely to the bird Raphtontis. This creature, stretching his murky wings and clacking his saw-like beak, abandoned his perch and hung poised in air with one ember-colored eye malignly fixed on Ralibar Vooz. Then, floating slowly, his long snakish neck reverted and his eye maintaining its vigilance, the bird flew among the lava-ridges toward the pyramidal cone of Voormithadreth; and Ralibar Vooz followed, driven by a compulsion that he could neither understand nor resist.

Evidently the demon fowl knew all the turnings of that maze of delusion with which Ezdagor had environed his abode; for the hunter was led with comparatively little indirection across the enchanted buttress. He heard the far-off shouting of his men as he went; but his own voice was faint and thin as that of a flittermouse when he sought to reply. Soon he found himself at

the bottom of a great scrap of the upper mountain, pitted with cavern-mouths. It was a part of Voormithadreth that he had never visited before.

Raphtontis rose toward the lowest cave, and hovered at its entrance while Ralibar Vooz climbed precariously behind him amid a heavy barrage of bones and glassedged flints and other oddments of less mentionable nature hurled by the Voormis. These low, brutal savages, fringing the dark mouths of the dens with their repulsive faces and members, greeted the hunter's progress with ferocious howlings and an inexhaustible supply of garbage. However, they did not molest Raphtontis, and it seemed that they were anxious to avoid hitting him with their missiles; though the presence of this hovering, wide-winged fowl interfered noticeably with their aim as Ralibar Vooz began to near the nethermost den.

Owing to this partial protection, the hunter was able to reach the cavern without serious injury. The entrance was rather strait; and Raphtontis flew upon the Voormis with open beak and flapping wings, compelling them to withdraw into the interior while Ralibar Vooz made firm his position on the threshold-ledge. Some, however, threw themselves on their faces to allow the passage of Raphtontis; and, rising when the bird had gone by, they assailed the Commorian as he followed his guide into the fetid gloom. They stood only half erect, and their shaggy heads were about his thighs and hips, snarling and snapping like dogs; and they clawed him with hook-shaped nails that caught and held in the links of his armor.

Weaponless he fought them in obedience to his geas, striking down their hideous faces with his mailed fist in a veritable madness that was not akin to the ardor of a huntsman. He felt their nails and teeth break on the close-woven links as he hurled them loose; but others took their places when he won onward a little into the murky cavern; and their females struck at his

legs like darting serpents; and their young beslavered his ankles with mouths wherein the fangs were as yet ungrown.

Before him, for his guidance, he heard the clanking of the wings of Raphtontis, and the harsh cries, half hiss and half caw, that were emitted by this bird at intervals. The darkness stifled him with a thousand stench; and his feet slipped in blood and filth at every step. But anon he knew that the Voormis had ceased to assail him. The cave sloped downward; and he breathed an air that was edged with sharp, acrid mineral odors. Groping for a while through sightless night, and descending a steep incline, he came to a sort of underground hall in which neither day or darkness prevailed. Here the archings of rock were visible by an obscure glow such as hidden moons might yield. Thence, through declivitous grottoes and along perilously skirted gulfs, he was conducted ever downward by Raphtontis into the world beneath the mountain Voormithadreth. Everywhere was that dim, unnatural light whose source he could not ascertain. Wings that were too broad for those of the bat flew vaguely overhead; and at whiles, in the shadowy caverns, he beheld great, fearsome bulks having a likeness to those behemoths and giant reptiles which burdened the Earth in earlier times, but because of the dimness he could not tell if these were living shapes or forms that the stone had taken.

Strong was the compulsion of his geas on Ralibar Vooz; and a numbness had seized his mind; and he felt only a dulled fear and a dazed wonder. It seemed that his will and his thoughts were no longer his own, but were become those of some alien person. He was going down to some obscure but predestined end, by a route that was darksome but foreknown.

At last the bird Raphtontis paused and hovered significantly in a cave distinguished from the others by a most evil potpourri of smells. Ralibar Vooz deemed at first that the cave was empty. Going forward to join

Raphtontis, he stumbled over certain attenuated remnants on the Boor, which appeared to be the skin-clad skeletons of men and various animals. Then, following the coal-bright gaze of the demon bird, he discerned in a dark recess the formless bulking of a couchant mass. And the mass stirred a little at his approach, and put forth with infinite slothfulness a huge and toad-shaped head. And the head opened its eyes very slightly, as if half awakened from slumber, so that they were visible as two slits of oozing phosphor in the black, browless face.

Ralibar Vooz perceived an odor of fresh blood amid the many fetors that rose to besiege his nostrils. A horror came upon him therewith; for, looking down, he beheld lying before the shadowy monster the lean husk of a thing that was neither man, beast nor Voormi. He stood hesitant, fearing to go closer yet powerless to retreat. But, admonished by an angry hissing from the archaeopteryx, together with a slashing stroke of its beak between his shoulder-blades, he went forward till he could see the fine dark fur on the dormant body and sleepily porrected head.

With new horror, and a sense of hideous doom, he heard his own voice speaking without volition: "O Lord Tsathaggua, I am the blood-offering sent by the sorcerer Egdagor."

There was a sluggish inclination of the toad-like head; and the eyes opened a little wider, and light flowed from them in viscous tricklings on the creased underlids. Then Ralibar Vooz seemed to hear a deep, rumbling sound; but he knew not whether it reverberated in the dusky air or in his own mind. And the sound shaped itself, albeit uncouthly, into syllables and words:

"Thanks are due to Egdagor for this offering. But, since I have fed lately on a well-blooded sacrifice, my hunger is appeased for the present, and I require not the offering. However, it may be that others of the Old Ones are

athirst or famished. And, since you came here with a geas upon you, it is not fitting that you should go hence without another. So I place you under this geas, to betake yourself downward through the caverns till you reach, after long descent, that bottomless gulf over which the spider-god Atlach-Nacha weaves his eternal webs. And there, calling to Atlach-Nacha, you must say: 'I am the gift sent by Tsathoggua.'"

So, with Raphtontis leading him, Ralibar Vooz departed from the presence of Tsathoggua by another route than that which had brought him there. The way steepened more and more; and it ran through chambers that were too vast for the searching of sight; and along precipices that fell sheer for an unknown distance to the black, sluggish form and somnolent murmur of underworld seas.

At last, on the verge of a chasm whose farther shore was lost in darkness, the night-flying bird hung motionless with level wings and down-dropping tail. Ralibar Vooz went close to the verge and saw that great webs were attached to it at intervals, seeming to span the gulf with their multiple crossing and reticulations of gray, rope thick strands. Apart from these, the chasm was bridgeless. Far out on one of the webs he discerned a darksome form, big as a crouching man but with long spider-like members. Then, like a dreamer who hears some nightmare sound, he heard his own voice crying loudly: "O Atlach-Nacha, I am the gift sent by Tsathoggua."

The dark form ran toward him with incredible swiftness. When it came near he saw that there was a kind of face on the squat ebon body, low down amid the several-jointed legs. The face peered up with a weird expression of doubt and inquiry; and terror crawled through the veins of the bold huntsman as he met the small, crafty eyes that were circled about with hair. Thin, shrill, piercing as a sting, there spoke to him the voice of the spider-god Atlach-Nacha: "I am duly grateful for the gift. But, since there is no one

else to bridge this chasm, and since eternity is required for the task, I can not spend my time in extracting you from those curious shards of metal. However, it may be that the antehuman sorcerer Haon-Dor, who abides beyond the gulf in his palace of primal enchantments, can somehow find a use for you. The bridge I have just now completed runs to the threshold of his abode; and your weight will serve to test the strength of my weaving. Go then, with this geas upon you, to cross the bridge and present yourself before Haon-Dor, saying: ‘Atlach-Nacha has sent me.’”

With these words, the spider-god withdrew his bulk from the web and ran quickly from sight along the chasm-edge, doubtless to begin the construction of a new bridge at some remoter point.

Though the third geas was heavy and compulsive upon him, Ralibar Vooz followed Raphtontis none too willingly over the night-bound depths. The weaving of Atlach-Nacha was strong beneath his feet, giving and swaying only a little; but between the strands, in unfathomable space below, he seemed to descry the dim flitting of dragons with claw-tipped wings; and, like a seething of the darkness, fearful hulks without name appeared to heave and sink from moment to moment.

However, he and his guide came presently to the gulf’s opposite shore, where the web of Atlach-Nacha was joined to the lowest step of a mighty stairway. The stairs were guarded by a coiled snake whose mottlings were broad as buckles, and whose middle volumes exceeded in girth the body of a stout warrior. The horny tail of this serpent rattled like a sistrum, and he thrust forth an evil head with fangs that were long as billhooks. But, seeing Raphtontis, he drew his coils aside and permitted Ralibar Vaoz to ascend the steps.

Thus, in fulfilment of the third geas, the hunter entered the thousand-columned palace of Haon-Dor. Strange and silent were those halls hewn

from the gray, fundamental rock of Earth. In them were faceless forms of smoke and mist that went uneasily to and fro, and statues representing monsters with myriad heads. In the vaults above, as if hung aloof in night, lamps burned with inverse flames that were like the combustion of ice and stone. A chill spirit of evil, ancient beyond all conception of man, was abroad in those halls; and horror and fear crept throughout them like invisible serpents, unknotted from sleep.

Threading the mazy chambers with the surety of one accustomed to all their windings, Raptontis conducted Ralibar Vooz to a high room whose walls described a circle, broken only by the one portal, through which he entered. The room was empty of furnishment, save for a five-pillared seat rising so far aloft without stairs or other means of approach, that it seemed only a winged being could ever attain thereto. But on the seat was a figure shrouded with thick, sable darkness, and having over its head and features a caul of grisly shadow.

The bird Raptontis hovered ominously before the columned chair. And Ralibar Vooz, in astonishment, heard a voice saying: "O Haon-Dor, Atlach-Nacha has sent me." And not till the voice ceased speaking did he know it for his own.

For a long time the silence seemed infrangible. There was no stirring of the high-seated figure. But Ralibar Vooz, peering trepidantly at the walls about him, beheld their former smoothness embossed with a thousand faces, twisted and awry like those of mad devils. The faces were thrust forward on necks that lengthened; and behind the necks malshapen shoulders and bodies emerged inch by inch from the stone, craning toward the huntsman. And beneath his feet the very floor was now cobbled with other faces, turning and tossing restlessly, and opening ever wider their demoniacal mouths and eyes.

At last the shrouded figure spoke; and though the words were of no mortal tongue, it seemed to the listener that he comprehended them darkly:

“My thanks are due to Atlach-Nacha for this sending. If I appear to hesitate, it is only because I am doubtful regarding what disposition I can make of you. My familiars, who crowd the walls and floors of this chamber, would devour you all too readily: but you would serve only as a morsel amid so many. On the whole, I believe that the best thing I can do is to send you on to my allies, the serpent-people. They are scientists of no ordinary attainment; and perhaps you might provide some special ingredient required in their chemistries. Consider, then, that a geas has been put upon you, and take yourself off to the caverns in which the serpent-people reside.”

Obeying this injunction, Ralibar Vooz went down through the darkest strata of that primeval underworld, beneath the palace of Haon-Dor. The guidance of Raptontis never failed him; and he came anon to the spacious caverns in which the serpent-men were busying themselves with a multitude of tasks. They walked lithely and sinuously erect on pre-mammalian members, their pided and hairless bodies bending with great suppleness. There was a loud and constant hissing of formulae as they went to and fro. Some were smelting the black nether ores; some were blowing molten obsidian into forms of flask and urn; some were measuring chemicals; others were decanting strange liquids and curious colloids. In their intense preoccupation, none of them seemed to notice the arrival of Ralibar Vooz and his guide.

After the hunter had repeated many times the message given him by Haon-Dor, one of the walking reptiles at last perceived his presence. This being eyed him with cold but highly disconcerting curiosity, and then emitted a sonorous hiss that was audible above all the noises of labor and converse. The other serpentmen ceased their toil immediately and began to

crowd around Ralibar Vooz. From the tone of their sibilations, it seemed that there was much argument among them. Certain of their number sidled close to the Commorian, touching his face and hands with their chill, scaly digits, and prying beneath his armor. He felt that they were anatomizing him with methodical minuteness. At the same time, he perceived that they paid no attention to Raptontis, who had perched himself on a large alembic.

After a while, some of the chemists went away and returned quickly, bearing among them two great jars of glass filled with a clear liquid. In one of the jars there floated upright a well-developed and mature male Voormi; in the other, a large and equally perfect specimen of Hyperborean manhood, not without a sort of general likeness to Ralibar Vooz himself. The bearers of these specimens deposited their burdens beside the hunter and then each of them delivered what was doubtless a learned dissertation on comparative biology.

This series of lectures, unlike many such, was quite brief. At the end the reptilian chemists returned to their various labors, and the jars were removed. One of the scientists then addressed himself to Ralibar Vooz with a fair though somewhat sibilant approximation of human speech:

“It was thoughtful of Haon-Dor to send you here. However, as you have seen, we are already supplied with an exemplar of your species; and, in the past, we have thoroughly dissected others and have learned all that there is to learn regarding this very uncouth and aberrant life-form.

“Also, since our chemistry is devoted almost wholly to the production of powerful toxic agents, we can find no use in our tests and manufactures for the extremely ordinary matters of which your body is composed. They are without pharmaceutic value. Moreover, we have long abandoned the eating of impure natural foods, and now confine ourselves to synthetic types of aliment. There is, as you must realize, no place for you in our economy.

“However, it may be that the Archetypes can somehow dispose of you. At least you will be a novelty to them, since no example of contemporary human evolution has so far descended to their stratum. Therefore we shall put you under that highly urgent and imperative kind of hypnosis which, in the parlance of warlockry, is known as a geas. And, obeying the hypnosis, you will go down to the Cavern of the Archetypes...”

The region to which the magistrate of Commoriom was now conducted lay at some distance below the ophidian laboratories. The air of the gulfs and grottoes along his way began to increase markedly in warmth, and was moist and steamy as that of some equatorial fen. A primordial luminosity, such as might have dawned before the creation of any sun, seemed to surround and pervade everything.

All about him, in this thick and semi-aqueous light, the hunter discerned the rocks and fauna and vegetable forms of a crassly primitive world. These shapes were dim, uncertain, wavering, and were all composed of loosely organized elements. Even in this bizarre and more than doubtful terrain of the under-Earth, Raptontis seemed wholly at home, and he flew on amid the sketchy plants and cloudy-looking boulders as if at no loss whatever in orienting himself. But Ralibar Vooz, in spite of the spell that stimulated and compelled him onward, had begun to feel a fatigue by no means unnatural in view of his prolonged and heroic itinerary. Also, he was much troubled by the elasticity of the ground, which sank beneath him at every step like an oversodded marsh, and seemed insubstantial to a quite alarming degree.

To his further disconcertion, he soon found that he had attracted the attention of a huge foggy monster with the rough outlines of a tyrannosaurus. This creature chased him amid the archetypal ferns and clubmosses; and overtaking him after five or six bounds, it proceeded to ingest him with the celerity of any latter-day saurian of the same species.

Luckily, the ingestment was not permanent for the tyrannosaurus' body-plasm, though fairly opaque, was more astral than material; and Ralibar Vooz, protesting stoutly against his confinement in its maw, felt the dark walls give way before him and tumbled out on the ground. After its third attempt to devour him, the monster must have decided that he was inedible. It turned and went away with immense leapings in search of comestibles on its own plane of matter. Ralibar Vooz continued his progress through the Cavern of the Archetypes: a progress often delayed by the alimentary designs of crude, misty-stomached allosaurs, pterodactyls, pterandons, stegosaurs, and other carnivora of the prime. At last, following his experience with a most persistent megalosaur, he beheld before him two entities of vaguely human outline. They were gigantic, with bodies almost globular in form, and they seemed to float rather than walk. Their features, though shadowy to the point of inchoateness, appeared to express aversion and hostility. They drew near to the Commorian, and he became aware that one of them was addressing him. The language used was wholly a matter of primitive vowel-sounds; but a meaning was forcibly, though indistinctly, conveyed:

“We, the originals of mankind, are dismayed by the sight of a copy so coarse and egregiously perverted from the true model. We disown you with sorrow and indignation. Your presence here is an unwarrantable intrusion; and it is obvious that you are not to be assimilated even by our most esurient dinosaurs. Therefore we put you under a geas: depart without delay from the Cavern of the Archetypes, and seek out the slimy gulf in which Abhoth, father and mother of all cosmic uncleanness, eternally carries on Its repugnant fission. We consider that you are fit only for Abhoth, which will perhaps mistake you for one of Its own progeny and devour you in accordance with the custom which It follows.”

The weary hunter was led by the untirable Raphtontis to a deep cavern on the same level as that of the Archetypes. Possibly it was a kind of annex to the latter. At any rate, the ground was much firmer there, even though the air was murkier; and Ralibar Vooz might have recovered a little of his customary aplomb, if it had not been for the ungodly and disgusting creatures which he soon began to meet. There were things which he could liken only to monstrous one-legged toads, and immense myriad-tailed worms, and miscreated lizards. They came flopping or crawling through the gloom in a ceaseless procession; and there was no end to the loathsome morphologic variations which they displayed. Unlike the Archetypes, they were formed of all too solid matter, and Ralibar Vooz was both fatigued and nauseated by the constant necessity of kicking them away from his shins. He was somewhat relieved to find, however, that these wretched abortions became steadily smaller as he continued his advance.

The dusk about him thickened with hot, evil steam that left an oozy deposit on his armor and bare face and hands. With every breath he inhaled an odor noisome beyond imagining. He stumbled and slipped on the crawling foulnesses underfoot. Then, in that reeky twilight, he saw the pausing of Raphtontis; and below the demoniac bird he descried a sort of pool with a margin of mud that was marled with obscene offal; and in the pool a grayish, horrid mass that nearly choked it from rim to rim.

Here, it seemed, was the ultimate source of all miscreation and abomination. For the gray mass quobbed and quivered, and swelled perpetually; and from it, in manifold fission, were spawned the anatomies that crept away on every side through the grotto. There were things like bodiless legs or arms that flailed in the slime, or heads that rolled, or floundering bellies with fishes' fins; and all manner of things malformed and monstrous, that grew in size as they departed from the neighborhood of

Abhoth. And those that swam not swiftly ashore when they fell into the pool from Abhoth, were devoured by mouths that gaped in the parent bulk.

Ralibar Vooz was beyond thought, beyond horror, in his weariness: else he would have known intolerable shame, seeing that he had come to the bourn ordained for him by the Archetypes as most fit and proper. A deadness near to death was upon his faculties; and he heard as if remote and high above him a voice that proclaimed to Abhoth the reason of his coming; and he did not know that the voice was his own.

There was no sound in answer; but out of the lumpy mass there grew a member that stretched and lengthened toward Ralibar Vopz where he stood waiting on the pool's margin. The member divided to a flat, webby hand, soft and slimy, which touched the hunter and went over his person slowly from foot to head. Having done this, it seemed that the thing had served its use: for it dropped quickly away from Abhoth and wriggled into the gloom like a serpent together with the other progeny.

Still waiting, Ralibar Vooz felt in his brain a sensation as of speech heard without words or sound. And the import, rendered in human language, was somewhat as follows:

“I, who am Abhoth, the coeval of the oldest gods, consider that the Archetypes have shown a questionable taste in recommending you to me. After careful inspection, I fail to recognize you as one of my relatives or progeny; though I must admit that I was nearly deceived at first by certain biologic similarities. You are quite alien to my experience; and I do not care to endanger my digestion with untried articles of diet.”

“Who you are, or whence you have come, I can not surmise; nor can I thank the Archetypes for troubling the profound and placid fertility of my existence with a problem so vexatious as the one that you offer. Get hence, I adjure you. There is a bleak and drear and dreadful limbo, known as the

Outer World, of which I have heard dimly; and I think that it might prove a suitable objective for your journeying. I settle an urgent geas upon you: go seek this Outer World with all possible expedition.”

Apparently Raphtontis realized that it was beyond the physical powers of his charge to fulfill the seventh geas without an interim of repose. He led the hunter to one of the numerous exits of the grotto inhabited by Abhoth: an exit giving on regions altogether unknown, opposite to the Cavern of the Archetypes. There, with significant gestures of his wings and beak, the bird indicated a sort of narrow alcove in the rock. The recess was dry and by no means uncomfortable as a sleeping-place. Ralibar Vooz was glad to lay himself down; and a black tide of slumber rolled upon him with the closing of his eyelids. Raphtontis remained on guard before the alcove, discouraging with strokes of his bill the wandering progeny of Abhoth that tried to assail the sleeper.

Since there was neither night nor day in that subterrene world, the term of oblivion enjoyed by Ralibar Vooz was hardly to be measured by the usual method of time-telling. He was aroused by the noise of vigorously flapping wings, and saw beside him the fowl Raphtontis, holding in his beak an unsavory object whose anatomy was that of a fish rather than anything else. Where or how he had caught this creature during his constant vigil was a more than dubious matter; but Ralibar Vooz had fasted too long to be squeamish. He accepted and devoured the proffered breakfast without ceremony.

After that, in conformity with the geas laid upon him by Abhoth, he resumed his journey back to the outer Earth. The route chosen by Raphtontis was presumably a short-cut. Anyhow, it was remote from the cloudy cave of the Archetypes, and the laboratories in which the serpent-men pursued their arduous toils and toxicological researches. Also, the

enchanted palace of Haon-Dor was omitted from the itinerary. But, after long, tedious climbing through a region of desolate crags and over a sort of underground plateau, the traveller came once more to the verge of that farstretching, bottomless chasm which was bridged only by the webs of the spider-god Atlach-Nacha.

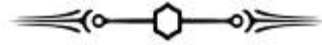
For some time past he had hurried his pace because of certain of the progeny of Abhoth, who had followed him from the start and had grown steadily bigger after the fashion of their kind, till they were now large as young tigers or bears. However, when he approached the nearest bridge, he saw that a ponderous and slothlike entity, preceding him, had already begun to cross it. The posteriors of this being was studded with unamiable eyes, and Ralibar Vooz was unsure for a little regarding its exact orientation. Not wishing to tread too closely upon the reverted talons of its heels, he waited till the monster had disappeared in the darkness; and by that time the spawn of Abhoth were hard upon him.

Raphtontis, with sharp admonitory cawings, floated before him above the giant web; and he was impelled to a rash haste by the imminently slavering snouts of the dark abnormalities behind. Owing to such precipitancy, he failed to notice that the web had been weakened and some of its strands torn or stretched by the weight of the sloth-like monster. Coming in view of the chasm's opposite verge, he thought only of reaching it, and redoubled his pace. But at this point the web gave way beneath him. He caught wildly at the broken, dangling strands, but could not arrest his fall. With several pieces of Atlach-Nacha's weaving clutched in his fingers, he was precipitated into that gulf which no one had ever voluntarily tried to plumb.

This, unfortunately, was a contingency that had not been provided against by the terms of the seventh geas.

The Coming of the White Worm

CHAPTER IX OF THE BOOK OF EIBON



RENDERED FROM THE OLD FRENCH MANUSCRIPT OF GASPARD
DU NORD.

EVAGH THE WARLOCK, dwelling beside the boreal sea, was aware of many strange and untimely portents in mid-summer. Chilly burned the sun above Mhu Thulan from a welkin clear and wannish as ice. At eve the aurora was hung from zenith to earth, like an arras in a high chamber of gods. Wan and rare were the poppies and small the anemones in the cliff-sequestered vales lying behind the house of Evagh; and the fruits in his walled garden were pale of rind and green at the core. Also, he beheld by day the unseasonable flight of great multitudes of fowl, going southward from the hidden isles beyond Mhu Thulan; and by night he heard the distressful clamor of other passing multitudes. And always, in the loud wind and crying surf, he harkened to the weird whisper of voices from realms of perennial winter.

Now Evagh was troubled by these portents, even as the rude fisher-folk on the shore of the haven below his house were troubled. Being a past-master of all sortilege, and a seer of remote and future things, he made use of his arts in an effort to divine their meaning. But a cloud was upon his eyes through the daytime; and a darkness thwarted him when he sought illumination in dreams. His most cunning horoscopes were put to naught; his familiars were silent or answered him equivocally; and confusion was

amid all his geomancies and hydromancies and haruspications. And it seemed to Evagh that an unknown power worked against him, mocking and making impotent in such fashion the sorcery that none had defeated heretofore. And Evagh knew, by certain tokens perceptible to wizards, that the power was an evil power, and its boding was of bale to man.

Day by day, through the middle summer, the fisher-folk went forth in their coracles of elk-hide and willow, casting their seines. But in the seines they drew dead fishes, blasted as if by fire or extreme cold; and they drew living monsters, such as their eldest captains had never beheld: things triple-headed and tailed and finned with horror; black, shapeless things that turned to a liquid foulness and ran away from the net; or headless things like bloated moons with green, frozen rays about them; or things leprous-eyed and bearded with stiffly-oozing slime.

Then, out of the sea-horized north, where ships from Cerngoth were wont to ply among the Arctic islands, a galley came drifting with idle oars and aimlessly veering helm. The tide beached it among the boats of the fishermen, which fared no longer to sea but were drawn up on the sands below the cliff-built house of Evagh. And, thronging about the galley in awe and wonder, the fishers beheld its oarsmen still at the oars and its captain at the helm. But the faces and hands of all were stark as bone, and were white as the flesh of leprosy; and the pupils of their open eyes had faded strangely, being indistinguishable now from the whites; and a blankness of horror was within them, like ice in deep pools that are fast frozen to the bottom. And Evagh himself, descending later, also beheld the galley's crew, and pondered much concerning the import of this prodigy.

Loath were the fishers to touch the dead men; and they murmured, saying that a doom was upon the sea, and a curse upon all sea-faring things and people. But Evagh, deeming that the bodies would rot in the sun and

would breed pestilence, commanded them to build a pile of driftwood about the galley; and when the pile had risen above the bulwarks, hiding from view the dead rowers, he fired it with his own hands.

High flamed the pile, and smoke ascended black as a storm-cloud, and was borne in windy volumes past the tall towers of Evagh on the cliff. But later, when the fire sank, the bodies of the oarsmen were seen sitting amid the mounded embers; and their arms were still outstretched in the attitude of rowing, and their fingers were clenched; though the oars had now dropped away from them in brands and ashes. And the captain of the galley stood upright still in his place: though the burnt helm had fallen beside him. Naught but the raiment of the marble corpses had been consumed; and they shone white as moon-washed marble above the charrings of wood; and nowhere upon them was there any blackness from the fire.

Deeming this thing an ill miracle, the fishers were all aghast, and they fled swiftly to the uppermost rocks. There remained with Evagh only his two servants, the boy Ratha and the ancient crone Ahilidis, who had both witnessed many of his conjurations and were thus well inured to sights of magic. And, with these two beside him, the sorcerer awaited the cooling of the brands.

Quickly the brands darkened; but smoke arose from them still throughout the noon and afternoon; and still they were over-hot for human treading when the hour drew toward sunset. So Evagh bade his servants to fetch water in urns from the sea and cast it upon the ashes and charrings. And after the smoke and the hissing had died, he went forward and approached the pale corpses. Nearing them, he was aware of a great coldness, such as would emanate from trans-Arctic ice; and the coldness began to ache in his hands and ears, and smote sharply through the mantle of fur. Going still closer, he touched one of the bodies with his forefinger-

tip; and the finger, though lightly pressed and quickly withdrawn, was seared as if by flame.

Evagh was much amazed: for the condition of the corpses was a thing unknown to him heretofore; and in all his science of wizardry there was naught to enlighten him. He bethought him that a spell had been laid upon the dead: an ensorcelling such as the wan polar demons might weave, or the chill witches of the moon might devise in their caverns of snow. And he deemed it well to retire for the time, lest the spell should now take effect upon others than the dead.

Returning to his house ere night, he burned at each door and window the gums that are most offensive to the northern demons; and at each angle where a spirit might enter, he posted one of his own familiars to guard against all intrusion. Afterwards, while Ratha and Ahilidis slept, he perused with sedulous care the writings of Pnom, in which are collated many powerful exorcisms. But ever and anon, as he read again, for his comfort, the old rubrics, he remembered ominously the saying of the prophet Lith, which no man had understood: "There is One that inhabits the place of utter cold, and One that respireth where none other may draw breath. In the days to come He shall issue forth among the isles and cities of men, and shall bring with Him as a white doom the wind that slumbereth in his dwelling."

Though a fire burned in the chamber, piled with fat pine and terebinth, it seemed that a deadly chill began to invade the air toward midnight. Then, as Evagh turned uneasily from the parchments of Pnom, and saw that the fires blazed high as if in no need of replenishment, he heard the sudden turmoil of a great wind full of sea-birds eerily shrieking, and the cries of land-fowl driven on helpless wings, and over all a high laughter of diabolic voices. Madly from the north the wind beat upon his square-based towers; and birds were cast like blown leaves of autumn against the stout-paned windows;

and devils seemed to tear and strain at the granite walls. Though the room's door was shut and the windows were tight-closed, an icy gust went round and round, circling the table where Evagh sat, snatching the broad parchments of Pnom from beneath his fingers, and plucking at the lamp-flame.

Vainly, with numbing thoughts, he strove to recall that counter-charm which is most effective against the spirits of the boreal quarter. Then, strangely, it seemed that the wind fell, leaving a mighty stillness about the house. The chill gust was gone from the room, the lamp and the fire burned steadily, and something of warmth returned slowly into the half-frozen marrow of Evagh.

Soon he was made aware of a light shining beyond his chamber windows, as if a belated moon had now risen above the rocks. But Evagh knew that the moon was at that time a thin crescent, declining with eventide. It seemed that the light shone from the north, pale and frigid as fire of ice; and going to the window he beheld a great beam that traversed all the sea, coming as if from the hidden pole. In that light the rocks were paler than marble, and the sands were whiter than sea-salt, and the huts of the fishermen were as white tombs. The walled garden of Evagh was full of the beam, and all the green had departed from its foliage and its blossoms were like flowers of snow. And the beam fell bleakly on the lower walls of his house, but left still in shadow the wall of that upper chamber from which he looked.

He thought that the beam poured from a pale cloud that had mounted above the sea-line, or else from a white peak that had lifted skyward in the night; but of this he was uncertain. Watching, he saw that it rose higher in the heavens but climbed not upon his walls. Pondering in vain the significance of the mystery, he seemed to hear in the air about him a sweet

and wizard voice. And, speaking in a tongue that he knew not, the voice uttered a rune of slumber. And Evagh could not resist the rune, and upon him fell such a numbness of sleep as overcomes the outworn watcher in a place of snow.

Waking stiffly at dawn, he rose up from the floor where he had lain, and witnessed a strange marvel. For, lo, in the harbour there towered an iceberg such as no vessel had yet sighted in all its sea-faring to the north, and no legend had told of among the dim Hyperborean isles. It filled the broad haven from shore to shore, and sheered up to a height immeasurable with piled escarpments and tiered precipices; and its pinnacles hung like towers in the zenith above the house of Evagh. It was higher than the dread mountain Achoravomas, which belches rivers of flame and liquid stone that pour unquenched through Tscho Vulpanomi to the austral main. It was steeper than the mountain Yarak, which marks the site of the boreal pole; and from it there fell a wan glittering on sea and land. Deathly and terrible was the glittering, and Evagh knew that this was the light he had beheld in the darkness.

Scarce could he draw breath in the cold that was on the air; and the light of the huge iceberg seared his eyeballs with an exceeding soreness. Yet he perceived an odd thing, that the rays of the glittering fell indirectly and to either side of his house; and the lower chambers, where Ratha and Ahilidis slept, were no longer touched by the beam as in the night; and upon all his house there was naught but the early sun and the morning shadows.

On the shore below he saw the charrings of the beached galley, and amid them the white corpses incombustible by fire. And along the sands and rocks, the fisher-folk were lying or standing upright in still, rigid postures, as if they had come forth from their hiding-places to behold the pale beam and had been smitten by a magic sleep. And the whole harbour-shore, and

the garden of Evagh, even to the front threshold of his house, was like a place where frost has fallen thickly over all.

Again he remembered the saying of Lith; and with much foreboding he descended to the ground story. There, at the northern windows, the boy Ratha and the hag Ahilidis were leaning with faces turned to the light. Stiffly they stood, with wide-open eyes, and a pale terror was in their regard, and upon them was the white death of the galley's crew. And, nearing them, the sorcerer was stayed by the terrible chillness that smote upon him from their bodies.

He would have fled from the house, knowing his magic wholly ineffectual against this thing. But it came to him that death was in the direct falling of the rays from the iceberg, and, leaving the house, he must perforce enter that fatal light. And it came to him also that he alone, of all who dwelt on that shore, had been exempted from the death. He could not surmise the reason of his exemption; but in the end he deemed it best to remain patiently and without fear, waiting whatever should befall.

Returning to his chamber he busied himself with various conjurations. But his familiars had gone away in the night, forsaking the angles at which he had posted them; and no spirit either human or demoniacal made reply to his questions. And not in any way known to wizards could he learn aught of the iceberg or divine the least inkling of its secret.

Presently, as he laboured with his useless cantrips, he felt on his face the breathing of a wind that was not air but a subtler and rarer element cold as the moon's ether. His own breath forsook him with agonies unspeakable, and he fell down on the floor in a sort of swoon that was near to death. In the swoon he was doubtfully aware of voices uttering unfamiliar spells. Invisible fingers touched him with icy pangs; and about him came and went a bleak radiance, like a tide that flows and ebbs and flows again. Intolerable

was the radiance to all his senses; but it brightened slowly, with briefer ebbings; and in time his eyes and his flesh were tempered to endure it. Full upon him now was the light of the iceberg through his northern windows; and it seemed that a great Eye regarded him in the light. He would have risen to confront the Eye; but his swoon held him like a palsy.

After that, he slept again for a period. Waking, he found in all his limbs their wonted strength and quickness. The strange light was still upon him, filling all his chamber; and peering out he witnessed a new marvel. For, lo, his garden and the rocks and sea-sands below it were visible no longer. In their stead were level spaces of ice about his house, and tall ice-pinnacles that rose like towers from the broad battlements of a fortress. Beyond the verges of the ice he beheld a sea that lay remotely and far beneath; and beyond the sea the low looming of a dim shore.

Terror came to Evagh now, for he recognized in all this the workings of a sorcery plenipotent and beyond the power of all mortal wizards. For plain it was that his high house of granite stood no longer on the coast of Mhu Thulan, but was based now on some upper crag of the iceberg. Trembling, he knelt then and prayed to the Old Ones, who dwell secretly in subterrene caverns, or abide under the sea or in the supermundane spaces. And even as he prayed, he heard a loud knocking at the door of his house.

In much fear and wonder he descended and flung wide the portals. Before him were two men, or creatures who had the likeness of men. Both were strange of visage and bright-skinned, and they wore for mantles such rune-woven stuffs as wizards wear. The runes were uncouth and alien; but when the man bespoke him he understood something of their speech, which was in a dialect of the Hyperborean isles.

“We serve the One whose coming was foretold by the prophet Lith,” they said. “From spaces beyond the limits of the north he hath come in his

floating citadel, the ice-mountain Yikilth, to voyage the mundane oceans and to blast with a chill splendour the puny peoples of humankind. He hath spared us alone amid the inhabitants of the broad isle Thulask, and hath taken us to go with him in his sea-faring upon Yikilth. He hath tempered our flesh to the rigour of his abode, and hath made respirable for us the air in which no mortal man may draw breath. Thee also he hath spared and hath acclimated by his spells to the coldness and the thin ether that go everywhere with Yikilth. Hail, O Evagh, whom we know for a great wizard by this token: since only the mightiest of warlocks are thus chosen and exempted.”

Sorely astonished was Evagh; but seeing that he had now to deal with men who were as himself, he questioned closely the two magicians of Thulask. They were named Dooni and Ux Loddhan, and were wise in the lore of the elder gods. The name of the One that they served was Rlim Shaikorth, and he dwelt in the highest summit of the ice-mountain. They told Evagh nothing of the nature or properties of Rlim Shaikorth; and concerning their own service to this being they avowed only that it consisted of such worship as is given to a god, together with the repudiation of all bonds that had linked them heretofore to mankind. And they told Evagh that he was to go with them before Rlim Shaikorth, and perform the due rite of obeisance, and accept the bond of final alienage.

So Evagh went with Dooni and Ux Loddhan and was led by them to a great pinnacle of ice that rose unmelted into the wan sun, beetling above all its fellows on the flat top of the berg. The pinnacle was hollow, and climbing therein by stairs of ice, they came at last to the chamber of Rlim Shaikorth, which was a circular dome with a round block at the center, forming a dais. And on the dais was that being whose advent prophet Lith had foretold obscurely.

At sight of this entity, the pulses of Evagh were stilled for an instant by terror; and, following quickly upon the terror, his gorge rose within him through excess of loathing. In all the world there was naught that could be likened for its foulness to Rlim Shaikorth. Something he had of the semblance of a fat white worm; but his bulk was beyond that of the sea-elephant. His half-coiled tail was thick as the middle folds of his body; and his front reared upward from the dais in the form of a white round disk, and upon it were imprinted vaguely the lineaments of a visage belonging neither to beast of the earth nor ocean-creature. And amid the visage a mouth curved uncleanly from side to side of the disk, opening and shutting incessantly on a pale and tongueless and toothless maw. The eye-sockets of Rlim Shaikorth were close together between his shallow nostrils; and the sockets were eyeless, but in them appeared from moment to moment globules of a blood-coloured matter having the form of eyeballs; and ever the globules broke and dripped down before the dais. And from the ice-floor of the dome there ascended two masses like stalagmites, purple and dark as frozen gore, which had been made by the ceaseless dripping of the globules.

Dooni and Ux Loddhan prostrated themselves before the being, and Evagh deemed it well to follow their example. Lying prone on the ice, he heard the red drops falling with a splash as of heavy tears; and then, in the dome above him, it seemed that a voice spoke; and the voice was like the sound of some hidden cataract in a glacier hollow with caverns.

“Behold, O Evagh,” said the voice. “I have preserved thee from the doom of thy fellow-men, and have made thee as they that inhabit the bourn of coldness, and they that inhale the airless void. Wisdom ineffable shall be thine, and mastery beyond the conquest of mortals, if thou wilt but worship me and become my thrall. With me thou shalt voyage amid the kingdoms of the north, and shalt pass among the green southern islands, and see the

white falling of death upon them in the light from Yikilth. Our coming shall bring eternal frost on their gardens, and shall set upon their people's flesh the seal of that gulf whose rigor paleth one by one the most ardent stars, and putteth rime at the core of suns. All this thou shalt witness, being as one of the lords of death, supernal and immortal; and in the end thou shalt return with me to that world beyond the uttermost pole, in which is mine abiding empire. For I am he whose coming even the gods may not oppose."

Now, seeing that he was without choice in the matter, Evagh professed himself willing to yield worship and service to the pale worm. Beneath the instruction of Dooni and Ux Loddhan, he performed the sevenfold rite that is scarce suitable for narration here, and swore the threefold vow of unspeakable alienation.

Thereafter, for many days and nights, he sailed with Rlim Shaikorth adown the coast of Mhu Thulan. Strange was the manner of that voyaging, for it seemed that the great iceberg was guided by the sorcery of the worm, prevailing ever against wind and tide. And always, by night or day, like the beams of a deathly beacon, the chill splendour smote afar from Yikilth. Proud galleys were overtaken as they fled southward, and their crews were blasted at the oars; and often ships were caught and embedded in the new bastions of ice that formed daily around the base of that ever-growing mountain.

The fair Hyperborean ports, busy with maritime traffic, were stilled by the passing of Rlim Shaikorth. Idle were their streets and wharves, idle was the shipping in their harbours, when the pale light had come and gone. Far inland fell the rays, bringing to the fields and gardens a blight of trans-Arctic winter; and forests were frozen and the beasts that roamed them were turned as if into marble, so that men who came long afterward to that region found the elk and bear and mammoth still standing in all the postures of

life. But, dwelling upon Yikilth, the sorcerer Evagh was immune to the icy death; and, sitting in his house or walking abroad on the berg, he was aware of no sharper cold than that which abides in summer shadows.

Now, beside Dooni and Ux Loddhan, the sorcerers of Thulask, there were five other wizards that went with Evagh on that voyage, having been chosen by Rlim Shaikorth. They too had been tempered to the coldness by Yikilth, and their houses had been transported to the berg by unknown enchantment. They were outlandish and uncouth men, called Polarians, from islands nearer the pole than broad Thulask; and Evagh could understand little of their ways; and their sorcery was foreign to him, and their speech was unintelligible; nor was it known to the Thulaskians.

Daily the eight wizards found on their tables all the provender necessary for human sustenance; though they knew not the agency by which it was supplied. All were united in the worship of the white worm; and all, it seemed, were content in a measure with their lot, and were fain of that unearthly lore and dominion which the worm had promised them. But Evagh was uneasy at heart, and rebelled in secret against his thralldom to Rlim Shaikorth; and he beheld with revulsion the doom that went forth eternally from Yikilth upon lovely cities and fruitful ocean-shores. Ruthfully he saw the blasting of flower-girdled Cerngoth, and the boreal stillness that descended on the thronged streets of Leqquan, and the frost that seared with sudden whiteness the garths and orchards of the sea-fronting valley of Aguil. And sorrow was in his heart for the fishing-coracles and the biremes of trade and warfare that floated manless after they had met Yikilth.

Ever southward sailed the great iceberg, bearing its lethal winter to lands where the summer sun rode high. And Evagh kept his own counsel, and followed in all ways the custom of Dooni and Ux Loddhan and the others.

At intervals that were regulated by the motions of the circumpolar stars, the eight wizards climbed to that lofty chamber in which Rlim Shaikorth abode perpetually, half-coiled on his dais of ice. There, in a ritual whose cadences corresponded to the falling of those eye-like tears that were wept by the worm, and with genuflections timed to the yawning and shutting of his mouth, they yielded to Rlim Shaikorth the required adoration. Sometimes the worm was silent, and sometimes he bespoke them, renewing vaguely the promises he had made. And Evagh learned from the others that the worm slept for a period at each darkening of the moon; and only at that time did the sanguine tears suspend their falling, and the mouth forbear its alternate closing and gaping.

At the third repetition of the rites of worship, it came to pass that only seven wizards climbed to the tower. Evagh, counting their number, perceived that the missing man was one of the five outlanders. Afterwards, he questioned Dooni and Ux Loddhan regarding this matter, and made signs of inquiry to the four northrons; but it seemed that the fate of the absent warlock was a thing mysterious to them all. Nothing was seen or heard of him from that time; and Evagh, pondering long and deeply, was somewhat disquieted. For, during the ceremony in the tower chamber, it had seemed to him that the worm was grosser of bulk and girth than on any prior occasion.

Covertly he asked what manner of nutriment was required by Rlim Shaikorth. Concerning this, there was much dubiety and dispute: for Ux Loddhan maintained that the worm fed on nothing less unique than the hearts of white Arctic bears; while Dooni swore that his rightful nourishment was the liver of whales. But, to their knowledge, the worm had not eaten during their sojourn upon Yikilth; and both averred that the intervals between his times of feeding were longer than those of any

terrestrial creature, being computable not in hours or days but in whole years.

Still the iceberg followed its course, ever vaster and more prodigious beneath the heightening sun; and again, at the star-appointed time, which was the forenoon of every third day, the sorcerers convened in the presence of Rlim Shaikorth. To the perturbation of all, their number was now but six; and the lost warlock was another of the outlanders. And the worm had greatened still more in size; and the increase was visible as a thickening of his whole body from head to tail.

Deeming these circumstances an ill augury, the six made fearful supplication to the worm in their various tongues, and implored him to tell them the fate of their absent fellows. And the worm answered; and his speech was intelligible to Evagh and Ux Loddhan and Dooni and the three northrons, each thinking that he had been addressed in his native language.

“This matter is a mystery concerning which ye shall all receive enlightenment in turn. Know this: the two that have vanished are still present; and they and ye also shall share even as I have promised in the ultramundane lore and empery of Rlim Shaikorth.”

Afterwards, when they had descended from the tower, Evagh and the two Thulaskians debated the interpretation of this answer. Evagh maintained that the import was sinister, for truly their missing companions were present only in the worm’s belly; but the others argued that these men had undergone a more mystical translation and were now elevated beyond human sight and hearing. Forthwith they began to make ready with prayer and austerity, in expectation of some sublime apotheosis which would come to them in due turn. But Evagh was still fearful; and he could not trust the equivocal pledges of the worm; and doubt remained with him.

Seeking to assuage his doubt and peradventure to find some trace of the lost Polarians, he made search of the mighty berg, on whose battlements his own house and the houses of the other warlocks were perched like the tiny huts of fishers on ocean-cliffs. In this quest the others would not accompany him, fearing to incur the worm's displeasure. From verge to verge of Yikilth he roamed unhindered, as if on some broad plateau with peaks and horns; and he climbed perilously on the upper scarps, and went down into deep crevasses and caverns where the sun failed and there was no other light than the strange luster of that unearthly ice. Embedded here in the walls, as if in the stone of nether strata, he saw dwellings such as men had never built, and vessels that might belong to other ages or worlds; but nowhere could he detect the presence of any living creature; and no spirit or shadow gave response to the necromatic evocations which he uttered oftentimes as he went along the chasms and chambers.

So Evagh was still apprehensive of the worm's treachery; and he resolved to remain awake on the night preceding the next celebration of the rites of worship; and at eve of that night he assured himself that the other wizards were all housed in their separate mansions, to the number of five. And, having ascertained this, he set himself to watch without remission the entrance of Rlim Shaikorth's tower, which was plainly visible from his own windows.

Weird and chill was the shining of the berg in the darkness; for a light as of frozen stars was effulgent at all times from the ice. A moon that was little past the full arose early on the orient seas. But Evagh, holding vigil at his window till midnight, saw that no visible form emerged from the tall tower, and none entered it. At midnight there came upon him a sudden drowsiness, such as would be felt by one who had drunk some opiate wine; and he could

not sustain his vigil any longer but slept deeply and unbrokenly throughout the remainder of the night.

On the following day there were but four sorcerers who gathered in the ice-dome and gave homage to Rlim Shaikorth. And Evagh saw that two more of the outlanders, men of bulk and stature dwarfish beyond their fellows, were now missing.

One by one thereafter, on nights preceding the ceremony of worship, the companions of Evagh vanished. The last Polarian was next to go; and it came to pass that only Evagh and Ux Loddhan and Dooni went to the tower; and then Evagh and Ux Loddhan went alone. And terror mounted daily in Evagh, for he felt that his own time drew near; and he would have hurled himself into the sea from the high ramparts of Yikilth, if Ux Loddhan, who perceived his intention, had not warned him that no man could depart therefrom and live again in solar warmth and terrene air, having been habituated to the coldness and thin ether. And Ux Loddhan, it seemed, was wholly oblivious to his doom, and was fain to impute an esoteric significance to the ever-growing bulk of the white worm and the vanishing of the wizards.

So, at that time when the moon had waned and darkened wholly, it occurred that Evagh climbed before Rlim Shaikorth with infinite trepidation and loath, laggard steps. And, entering the dome with downcast eyes, he found himself to be the sole worshipper.

A palsy of fear was upon him as he made obeisance; and scarcely he dared to lift his eyes and regard the worm. But even as he began to perform the customary genuflections, he became aware that the red tears of Rlim Shaikorth no longer fell on the purple stalagmites; nor was there any sound such as the worm was wont to make by the perpetual opening and shutting of his mouth. And venturing at last to look upward, Evagh beheld the

abhorrently swollen mass of the monster, whose thickness was such as to overhang the dais' rim; and he saw that the mouth and eye-holes of Rlim Shaikorth were closed as if in slumber; and thereupon he recalled how the wizards of Thulask had told him that the worm slept for an interval at the darkening of each moon; which was a thing he had forgotten temporarily in his extreme dread and apprehension.

Now was Evagh sorely bewildered, for the rites he had learned from his fellows could be fittingly performed only while the tears of Rlim Shaikorth fell down and his mouth gaped and closed and gaped again in measured alternation. And none had instructed him as to what rites were proper and suitable during the slumber of the worm. And, being in much doubt, he said softly:

“Wakest thou, O Rlim Shaikorth?”

In reply, he seemed to hear a multitude of voices that issued obscurely from out the pale, tumid mass before him. The sound of the voices was weirdly muffled, but among them he distinguished the accents of Dooni and Ux Loddhan; and there was a thick muttering of outlandish words which Evagh knew for the speech of the five Polarians; and beneath this he caught, or seemed to catch, innumerable undertones that were not the voices of men or beasts, nor such sounds as would be emitted by earthly demons. And the voices rose and clamoured, like those of a throng of prisoners in some profound oubliette.

Anon, as he listened in horror ineffable, the voice of Dooni became articulate above the others; and the manifold clamour and muttering ceased, as if a multitude were hushed to hear its own spokesman. And Evagh heard the tones of Dooni, saying:

“The worm sleepeth, but we whom the worm hath devoured are awake. Direly has he deceived us, for he came to our houses in the night, devouring

us bodily one by one as we slept under the enchantment he had wrought. He has eaten our souls even as our bodies, and verily we are part of Rlim Shaikorth, but exist only as in a dark and noisome dungeon; and while the worm wakes we have no separate or conscious being, but are merged wholly in the ultraterrestrial being of Rlim Shaikorth.

“Hear then, O Evagh, the truth we have learned from our oneness with the worm. He has saved us from the white doom and has taken us upon Yikilth for this reason, because we alone of all mankind, who are sorcerers of high attainment and mastery, may endure the lethal ice-change and become breathers of the airless void, and thus, in the end, be made suitable for the provender of such as Rlim Shaikorth.

“Great and terrible is the worm, and the place wherefrom he cometh and whereto he returneth is not to be dreamt of by living men. And the worm is omniscient, save that he knows not the waking of them he has devoured, and their awareness during his slumber. But the worm, though ancient beyond the antiquity of worlds, is not immortal and is vulnerable in one particular. Whosoever learneth the time and means of his vulnerability and hath heart for this undertaking, may slay him easily. And the time for the deed is during his term of sleep. Therefore we adjure thee now by the faith of the Old Ones to draw the sword thou wearest beneath thy mantle and plunge it in the side of Rlim Shaikorth: for such is the means of his slaying.

“Thus alone, O Evagh, shall the going forth of the pale death be ended; and only thus shall we, thy fellow-sorcerers, obtain release from our blind thralldom and incarceration; and with us many that the worm hath betrayed and eaten in former ages and upon distant worlds. And only by the doing of this thing shalt thou escape the wan and loathly mouth of the worm, nor abide henceforward as a doubtful ghost among other ghosts in the evil

blackness of his belly. But know, however, that he who slayeth Rlim Shaikorth must necessarily perish in the slaying.”

Evagh, being wholly astounded, made question of Dooni and was answered readily concerning all that he asked. And often-times the voice of Ux Loddhan replied to him; and sometimes there were unintelligible murmurs as outcries from certain others of those foully enmewed phantoms. Much did Evagh learn of the worm’s origin and essence; and he was told the secret of Yikilth, and the manner wherein Yikilth had floated down from trans-Arctic gulfs to voyage the seas of Earth. Ever, as he listened, his abhorrence greatened: though deeds of dark sorcery and conjured devils had long indurated his flesh and soul, making him callous to more than common horrors. But of that which he learned it were ill to speak now.

At length there was silence in the dome; for the worm slept soundly, and Evagh had no longer any will to question the ghost of Dooni; and they that were imprisoned with Dooni seemed to wait and watch in a stillness of death.

Then, being a man of much hardihood and resolution, Evagh delayed no more but drew from its ivory sheath the short but well-tempered sword of bronze which he carried always at his baldric. Approaching the dais closely, he plunged the blade in the over-swelling mass of Rlim Shaikorth. The blade entered easily with a slicing and tearing motion, as if he had stabbed a monstrous bladder, and was not stayed even by the broad pommel; and the whole right hand of Evagh was drawn after it into the wound.

He perceived no quiver or stirring of the worm, but out of the wound there gushed a sudden torrent of black liquescent matter, swiftening and deepening irresistibly till the sword was caught from Evagh’s grasp as if in a mill-race. Hotter far than blood, and smoking with strange steam-like vapors, the liquid poured over his arms and splashed his raiment as it fell.

Quickly the ice was a-wash about his feet; but still the fluid welled as if from some inexhaustible spring of foulness; and it spread everywhere in pools and runlets that came together.

Evagh would have fled then; but the sable liquid, mounting and flowing, was above his ankles when he neared the stair-head; and it rushed adown the stairway before him like a cataract in some steeply pitching cavern. Hotter and hotter it grew, boiling, bubbling; while the current strengthened, and clutched at him and drew him like malignant hands. He feared to essay the downward stairs; nor was there any place now in all the dome where he could climb for refuge. He turned, striving against the tide for bare foothold, and saw dimly through the reeking vapours the throned mass of Rlim Shaikorth. The gash had widened prodigiously, and a stream surged from it like the waters of a broken weir, billowing outward around the dais; and yet, as if in further proof of the worm's unearthly nature, his bulk was in no wise diminished thereby. And still the black liquid came in an evil flood; and it rose swirling about the knees of Evagh; and the vapours seemed to take the forms of a myriad press of phantoms, wreathing obscurely together and dividing once more as they went past him. Then, as he tottered and grew giddy on the stair-head, he was swept away and was hurled to his death on the ice-steps far below.

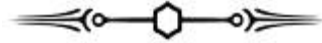
That day, on the sea to eastward of middle Hyperborea, the crews of certain merchant galleys beheld an unheard-of thing. For, lo, as they sped north, returning from far ocean-isles with a wind that aided their oars, they sighted in the late forenoon a monstrous iceberg whose pinnacles and crags loomed high as mountains. The berg shone in part with a weird light; and from its loftiest pinnacle poured an ink-black torrent; and all the ice-cliffs and buttresses beneath were a-stream with rapids and cascades and sheeted falls of the same blackness, that fumed like boiling water as they plunged

oceanward; and the sea around the iceberg was clouded and streaked for a wide interval as if with the dark fluid of the cuttlefish.

The mariners feared to sail closer; but, full of awe and marvelling, they stayed their oars and lay watching the berg; and the wind dropped, so that their galleys drifted within view of it all that day. They saw that the berg dwindled swiftly, melting as though some unknown fire consumed it; and the air took on a strange warmth, and the water about their ships grew tepid. Crag by crag the ice was runneled and eaten away; and huge portions fell off with a mighty splashing; and the highest pinnacle collapsed; but still the blackness poured out as from an unfathomable fountain. The mariners thought, at whiles, that they beheld houses running seaward amid the loosened fragments; but of this they were uncertain because of those ever-mounting vapours. By sunset-time the berg had diminished to a mass no larger than a common floe; yet still the welling blackness overstreamed it; and it sank low in the wave; and the weird light was quenched altogether. Thereafter, the night being moonless, it was lost to vision; and a gale rose, blowing strongly from the south; and at dawn the sea was void of any remnant.

Concerning the matters related above, many and various legends have gone forth throughout Mhu Thulan and all the extreme Hyperboreal kingdoms and archipelagoes, even to the southmost isle of Oszhtor. The truth is not in such tales: for no man has known the truth heretofore. But I, the sorcerer Eibon, calling up through my necromancy the wave-wandering spectre of Evagh, have learned from him the veritable history of the worm's advent. And I have written it down in my volume with such omissions as are needful for the sparing of mortal weakness and sanity. And men will read this record, together with much more of the elder lore, in days long after the coming and melting of the great glacier.

The Maze of Maâl Dweb



BY THE LIGHT of the four small waning moons of Xiccarph, Tiglari had crossed that bottomless swamp wherein no reptile dwelt and no dragon descended; but where the pitch-black ooze was alive with incessant heavings. He had not cared to use the high causey of corundum that spanned the fen, and had threaded his way with much peril from isle to sedgy isle that shuddered gelatinously beneath him. When he reached the solid shore and the shelter of the palm-tall rushes, he did not approach the porphyry stairs that wound skyward through giddy chasms and along glassy scarps to the house of Maal Dweb. The causey and the stairs were guarded by the silent, colossal automatons of Maal Dweb, whose arms ended in long crescent blades of tempered steel which were raised in implacable scything against any who came thither without their master's permission.

Tiglari's naked body was smeared with the juice of a plant repugnant to all the fauna of Xiccarph. By virtue of this he hoped to pass unharmed the ferocious ape-like creatures that roamed at will through the tyrant's cliff-hung gardens. He carried a coil of woven root-fibre, strong and light, and weighted with a brazen ball, for use in climbing the mesa. At his side, in a sheath of chimera-skin, he wore a needle-sharp knife that had been dipped in the poison of winged vipers.

Many, before Tiglari, with the same noble dream of tyrannicide, had attempted to cross the fen and scale the scarps. But none had returned; and the fate of such as had won to the palace of Maal Dweb was a much-

disputed problem. But Tiglari, the skilled jungle hunter, was undeterred by the hideous dubieties before him.

That escalate would have been an improbable feat by the full light of the three suns of Xiccarph. With eyes keen as those of some night-flying pterodactyl, Tiglari hurled his weighted coil about narrow coigns and salients. He climbed with simian ease from footheld to foothold; and at length he gained a little buttress beneath the last cliff. From this vantage it was easy to fling his rope around a crooked tree that leaned gulfward with scimitar-like foliage from the gardens.

Evading the sharp, semi-metallic leaves that slashed downward as the tree bent limberly with his weight, he stood, stooping warily, on the fearsome and fabled mesa. Here, it was said, with no human aid, the half-demoniac sorcerer had carved a mountain's pinnacles into walls, domes and turrets, and had leveled the rest of the mountain to a flat space about them. This space he had covered with loamy soil, produced by magic; and therein he had planted curious baneful trees from outlying worlds, together with flowers that might have been those of some exuberant hell.

Little enough was known of these gardens; but the flora that grew upon the northern, southern and western sides of the palace was believed to be less deadly than that which faced the dawning of the three suns. Much of this latter vegetation, accordiag to myth, had been trained and topiarized in the form of a labyrinth, balefully ingenious, that concealed atrocious traps and unknown dooms. Mindful of this labyrinth, Tiglari had approached the place on the side toward the sunset.

Breathless from his climb, he crouched in the garden shadows. About him heavy-hooded blossoms leaned in venomous languor, or fawned with open mouths that exhaled a narcotic perfume or diffused a pollen of madness. Anomalous, multiform, with silhouettes that curdled the blood or

touched the mind with nightmare, the trees of Maal Dweb appeared to gather and conspire against him. Some arose with the sinuous towering of plumed pythons, of aigretted dragons. Others crouched with radiating limbs like the hairy members of giant spiders. They seemed to close in upon Tiglari. They waved their frightful darts of thorn, their scythe-like leaves. They blotted the four moons with webs of arabesque menace.

With endless caution the hunter made his way forward, seeking a rift in the monstrous hedge. His faculties, ever alert, wore quickened still more by fear and hatred. The fear was not for himself but for the girl Athlé, his beloved and the fairest of his tribe, who had gone up alone that evening by the causeway of corundum and the porphyry stairs at the summons of Maal Dweb. His hatred was that of an outraged lover for the all-powerful, all-dreaded tyrant whom no man had ever seen, and from whose abode no woman ever came back; who spoke with an iron voice audible in far cities or outmost jungles; who punished the disobedient with a doom of falling fire swifter than the thunderstone.

Maal Dweb had taken ever the fairest from among the maidens of the planet Xiccarph; and no mansion of the walled towns, or outland cave, was exempt from his scrutiny. He had chosen no less than fifty girls during the period of his tyranny; and these, forsaking their lovers and kinsfolk voluntarily, lest the wrath of Maal Dweb should descend upon them, had gone one by one to the mountain citadel and were lost behind its cryptic walls. There, as the odalisques of the ageing sorcerer, they were supposed to dwell in halls that multiplied their beauty with a thousand mirrors; and were said to have for servants women of brass and men of iron.

Tiglari had poured before Athlé his uncouth adoration and the spoils of the chase, but having many rivals, was unsure of her favor. Cool as a river-lily, she had accepted impartially his worship and that of the others, among

whom the warrior Mocair was perhaps the most formidable. Returning from the hunt, Tiglari had found the tribe in lamentation; and learning that Athlé had departed to the harem of Maal Dweb, was swift to follow. He had not told his intention to anyone, since the ears of Maal Dweb were everywhere; and he did not know whether Mocair or any of the others had preceded him in his desperate errantry. But it was not unlikely that Mocair had already dared the obscure and hideous perils of the mountain.

The thought of this was enough to drive Tiglari forward with a rash disregard of the clutching foliations and reptile flowers. He came to a gap in the horrible grove, and saw the saffron lights from the sorcerer's windows. The lights were vigilant as dragon's eyes, and appeared to regard him with an evil awareness. But Tiglari leapt toward them, across the gap, and heard the clash of sabered leaves meeting behind him.

Before him was an open lawn, covered with a queer grass that squirmed like innumerable worms under his feet. He did not care to linger upon that lawn. There were no footmarks in the grass; but, nearing the palace portico, he saw a coil of thin rope that someone had flung aside, and surmised that Mocair had preceded him.

There were paths of mottled marble about the palace, and fountains that played from the throats of carven monsters. The open portals were unguarded, and the whole building was still as a mausoleum lit by windless lamps. Tiglari, however, mistrusted this appearance of quietude and slumber, and followed the bordering paths for some distance before daring to approach nearer to the palace.

Certain large and shadowy animals, which he took for the apish monsters of Maal Dweb, went by him in the gloom. Some of them ran in four-footed fashion, while others maintained the half-erect posture of anthropoids; but all were hairy and uncouth. They did not offer to molest Tiglari; but,

whining dismally, they slunk away as if to avoid him. By this token he knew that they were actual beasts, and could not abide the odor with which he had smeared his limbs and torso.

At length he came to a lampless, column-crowded portico; and, gliding silently as a jungle snake, he entered the mysterious house of Maal Dweb. A door stood open behind the dark pillars; and beyond the door he discerned the dim reaches of an empty hall.

Tiglari went in with redoubled caution, and began to follow the arras'd wall. The place was full of unknown perfumes, languorous and somnolent: a subtle reek as of censers in hidden alcoves of love. He did not like the perfumes; and the silence troubled him more and more. It seemed to him that the darkness was thick with unheard breathings, was alive with invisible movements.

Slowly, like the opening of great yellow eyes, yellow, flames arose in lamps of copper along the hall. Tiglari hid himself behind an arras; and peering forth presently, he saw that the hall was still deserted. Finally he dared to resume his progress. All around him the rich hangings, brodered with purple men and blue women on a field of blood, appeared to stir with uneasy life in a wind he could not feel. But there was no sign of the presence of Maal Dweb or his metal servitors and human odalisques.

The doors on either side of the hall, with cunningly mated valves of ebony and ivory, were all closed. At the far end Tiglari saw a thin rift of light in a somber double arras. Parting the arras very slowly, he peered through into a huge brilliantly lit chamber that seemed to be the harem of Maal Dweb, peopled with all the girls that the enchanter had summoned to his dwelling. It seemed, in fact, that there were hundreds, leaning or lying on ornate couches, or standing in attitudes of languor or terror. Tiglari discerned in the throng the women of Ommu-Zain, whose flesh is whiter

than desert salt; the slim girls of Uthmai, who are molded from breathing, palpitating jet; the queenly topaz girls of equatorial Xala; and the small women of Ilap, who have the tones of newly greening bronze. But among them all he could not find the lotus-like beauty of Athlé.

Much he marveled at the number of the women and the perfect stillness with which they maintained their various postures. They were like goddesses that slept in some enchanted hall of eternity. Tiglari, the intrepid hunter, was awed and frightened. These women — if indeed they were women and not mere statues — were surely the thralls of a death-like spell. Here, indeed, was proof of the sorcery of Maal Dweb.

However, if Tiglari were to continue his search, he must traverse that enchanted chamber. Feeling that a marble sleep might descend upon him at the crossing of the sill, he went in with held breath and furtive leopard-like paces. About him the women preserved their eternal stillness. Each, it seemed, had been overcome by the spell at the instant of some particular emotion, whether of fear, wonder, curiosity, vanity, weariness, anger or voluptuousness. Their number was fewer than he had supposed; and the room itself was smaller: but metal mirrors, paneling the walls, had created an illusion of multitude and immensity.

At the farther end he parted a second double arras, and peered into a twilight chamber illumined dimly by two censers that gave forth a parti-colored glow. The censers stood on tripods, facing each other. Between them, beneath a canopy of some dark and smoldering stuff with hinges braided like women's hair, was a couch of nightdeep purples bordered with silver birds that fought against golden snakes.

On the couch, in sober garments, a man reclined as if weary or asleep. The man's face was dim with ever-wavering shadows; but it did not occur to Tiglari that this was any other than the redoubtable tyrant whom he had

come to slay. He knew that this was Maal Dweb, whom no man had seen in the flesh but whose power was manifest to all: the occult, omniscient ruler of Xiccarph; the suzerain of the three suns and of all their planets and moons.

Like ghostly sentinels, the symbols of the grandeur of Maal Dweb, the images of his frightful empire rose up to confront Tiglari. But the thought of Athlé was a red mist that blotted all. He forgot his eery terrors, his awe of that wizard palace. The rage of the bereaved lover, the bloodthirst of the cunning hunter awoke within him. He neared the unconscious sorcerer; and his hand tightened on the hilt of the needle-sharp knife that had been dipped in vipervenom.

The man before him lay with closed eyes and a cryptic weariness on his mouth and eyelids. He seemed to meditate rather than sleep, like one who wanders in a maze of distant memories or profound reveries. About him the walls were draped with funereal hangings, darkly figured. Above him the twin censers wrought a cloudly glow, and diffused throughout the room their drowsy myrrh, which made Tiglari's senses swim with a strange dimness.

Crouching tiger-wise, he made ready for the stroke. Then, mastering the subtle vertigo of the perfume, he rose up; and his arm, with the darting movement of some heavy but supple adder, struck fiercely at the tyrant's heart.

It was as if he tried to pierce a wall of stone. In midair, before and above the recumbent enchanter, the knife clashed on some unseen, impenetrable substance; and the point broke off and tinkled on the floor at Tiglari's feet. Uncomprehending, baffled; he peered at the being whom he had sought to slay. Maal Dweb had not stirred nor opened his eyes; but his look of enigmatic weariness was somehow touched with a faint and cruel amusement.

Tiglari put out his hand to verify a curious notion that had occurred to him. Even as he had suspected, there was no couch or canopy between the censers — only a vertical, unbroken, highly polished surface in which the couch and its occupant were apparently reflected. But, to his further mystification, he himself was not visible in the mirror.

He whirled about, thinking that Maal Dweb must be somewhere in the room. Even as he turned, the funereal draperies rushed back with a silken, evil whispering from the walls, as if drawn by unseen hands. The chamber leapt into sudden glaring light; the walls appeared to recede illimitably; and naked giants whose umber-brown limbs and torsos glistened as if smeared with ointment, stood in menacing postures on every side. Their eyes glowered like those of jungle creatures; and each of them held an enormous knife, from which the point had been broken.

This, thought Tiglari, was a fearsome thaumaturgy; and he crouched down, wary as a trapped animal, to await the assault of the giants. But these beings, crouching simultaneously, mimicked his every movement. It came to him that what he saw was his own reflection, multiplied in the mirrors.

He turned again. The tasseled canopy, the couch of nightdark purples, the reclining dreamer, had vanished. Only the censers remained, rearing before a glassy wall that gave back like the others the reflection of Tiglari himself.

Baffled and terrified, he felt that Maal Dweb, the allseeing, all-potent magician, was playing a game and was deluding him with elaborate mockeries. Rashly indeed had Tiglari pitted his simple brawn and forest craft against a being capable of such demoniac artifice. He dared not stir, he scarcely ventured to breathe. The monstrous reflections appeared to watch him like giants guarding a captive pigmy. The light, which streamed as if from hidden lamps in the mirrors, took on a more pitiless and alarming luster. The reaches of the room seemed to deepen; and far away in their

shadows he saw the gathering of vapors with human faces that melted and reformed incessantly and were never twice the same.

Ever the weird radiance brightened; ever the mist of faces, like a hell-born smoke, dissolved and re-limned itself behind the immobile giants, in the lengthening vistas. How long Tiglari waited, he could not tell: the bright frozen horror of that room was a thing apart from time.

Now, in the lit air, a voice began to speak; a voice that was toneless, deliberate, and disembodied. It was faintly contemptuous; a little weary, slightly cruel. It was near as the beating of Tiglari's heart — and yet infinitely far.

‘What do you seek, Tiglari?’ said the voice. ‘Do you think to enter with impunity the palace of Maal Dweb? Others — many others, with the same intentions — have come before you. But all have paid a price for their temerity.’

‘I seek the maiden Athlé,’ said Tiglari. ‘What have you done with her?’

‘Athlé is very beautiful,’ returned the voice. ‘It is the will of Maal Dweb to make a certain use of her loveliness. The use is not one that should concern a hunter of wild beasts... You are unwise, Tiglari.’

‘Where is Athlé?’ persisted the hunter.

‘She has gone to find her fate in the labyrinth of Maal Dweb. Not long ago, the warrior Mocair, who had followed her to my palace, went out at my suggestion to pursue his search amid the threadless windings of that never-to-be-exhausted maze. Go now, Tiglari, and seek her also. There are many mysteries in my labyrinth; and among them, perhaps, is one which you are destined to solve.’

A door had opened in the mirror-paneled wall. Emerging as if from the mirrors, two of the metal slaves of Maal Dweb had appeared. Taller than living men, and gleaming from head to foot with implacable lusters as of

burnished swords, they came forward, upon Tiglari. The right arm of each was handed with a great sickle. Hastily, the hunter went out through the opened door, and heard behind him the surely clash of its meeting valves.

The short night of the planet Xiccarph was not yet over; and the moons had all gone down. But Tiglari saw before him the beginning of the fabled maze, illumined by glowing globular fruits that hang lantern-wise from arches of foliage. Guided only by their light, he entered the labyrinth.

At first, it was a place of elfin fantasies. There were quaint paths, pillared with antic trees, latticed with drolly peering faces of extravagant orchids, that led the seeker to hidden, surprising bowers of goblinry. It was as if those outer mazes had been planned wholly to entice and beguile. Then, by vague degrees, it seemed that the designer's mood had darkened, had become more ominous and baleful. The trees that lined the way with their twisted, intertwining boles were Laocöons of struggle and torture, lit by enormous fungi that seemed to lift unholy tapers. The path ran downward to eery pools alight with wreathing witchfires, or climbed with evilly tilted steps through caverns of close-set leafage that shone like brazen dragon-scales. It divided at every turn; the branching multiplied; and skilled though he was in jungle-craft, it would have been impossible for Tiglari to retrace his wanderings. He kept on, hoping that chance would somehow lead him to Athlé; and many times he called her name aloud but was answered only by remote, derisive echoes or by the dolorous howling of some unseen beast.

Now he was mounting through arbors of malignant hydra growths that coiled and uncoiled tumultuously about him. The way lightened more and more; the night-shining fruits and blossoms were pale and sickly as the dying tapers of a witches' revel. The earliest of the three suns had risen; and its gamboge-yellow beams were filtering in through the frilled and venomous vines.

Far off, and seeming to fall from some hidden height in the maze before him, he heard a chorus of brazen voices that were like articulate bells. He could not distinguish the words; but the accents were those of a solemn announcement, fraught with portentous finality. They ceased; and there was no sound other than the hiss and rustle of swaying plants.

It seemed now, as Tiglari went on, that his every step was predestined. He was no longer free to choose his way; for many of the paths were overgrown by things that he did not care to face; and others were blocked by horrid portcullises of cacti, or ended in pools that teemed with leeches larger than tunnies. The second and third suns arose, heightening with their emerald and carmine rays the horror of the strange web closing ineluctably about him.

He climbed on by stairs that reptilian vines had taken, and gradients lined with tossing, clashing aloes. Rarely, could he see the reaches below, or the levels toward which he was tending. Somewhere on the blind path he met one of the ape-like animals of Maal Dweb: a dark, savage creature, sleek and glistening like a wet otter, as if it bathed in one of the pools. It passed him with a hoarse growl, recoiling as the others had done from his repulsively smeared body... But nowhere could he find the maiden Athlé, or the warrior Mocair, who had preceded him into the maze.

Now he came to a curious little pavement of onyx, oblong, and surrounded by enormous flowers with bronze-like stems and great leaning bells that might have been the mouths of chimeras, yawning to disclose their crimson throats. He stepped forward upon the pavement through a narrow gap in this siagular hedge, and stood staring irresolutely at the serried blooms: for here the way seemed to end.

The onyx beneath his feet was wet with some unknown, sticky fluid. A quick sense of peril stirred within him, and he turned to retrace his steps. At

his first movement toward the opening through which he had entered, a long tendril like a wire of bronze recoiled with lightning rapidity from the base of each of the flower stems, and closed about his ankles. He stood trapped and helpless at the center of a taut net. Then, while he struggled impotently, the stems began to lean and tilt toward him, till the red mouths of their blossoms were close about his knees like a circle of fawning monsters.

Nearer they came, almost touching him. From their lips a clear, hueless liquid, dripping slowly at first, and then running in little rills, descended on his feet and ankles and shanks. Indescribably, his flesh crawled beneath it; then there was a passing numbness; then a furious stinging like the bites of innumerable insects. Between the crowding heads of the flowers, he saw that his legs had undergone a mysterious and horrifying change. Their natural hairiness had thickened, had assumed a shaggy pile like the fur of apes; the shanks themselves had somehow shortened and the feet had grown longer, with uncouth finger-like toes such as were possessed by the animals of Maal Dweb.

In a frenzy of nameless alarm, he drew his broken-tipped knife and began to slash at the flowers. It was as if he had assailed the armored heads of dragons, or had struck at ringing bells of iron. The blade snapped at the hilt. Then the blossoms, lifting hideously, were leaning about his waist, were laving his hips and thighs in their thin, evil slaver.

With the senses of one who drowns in nightmare, he heard the startled cry of a woman. Above the tilted flowers he beheld a strange scene which the hitherto impenetrable maze, parting as if by magic, had revealed. Fifty feet away, on the same level as the onyx pavement, there stood an elliptic dais of moon-white stone at whose center the maiden Athlé, emerging from the labyrinth on a raised, porphyry walk, had paused in an attitude of

wonder. Before her, in the claws of an immense marble lizard that reared above the dais, a round mirror of steely metal was held upright. Athlé, as if fascinated by some strange vision, was peering into the disk. Midway between the pavement and the dais, a row of slender brazen columns rose at broad intervals, topped with graven heads like demoniac Termini.

Tiglari would have called out to Athlé. But at that moment she took a single step toward the mirror, as if drawn by something that she saw in its depths; and the dull disk seemed to brighten with some internal, incandescent flame. The hunter's eyes were blinded by the spiky rays that leapt forth from it for an instant, enveloping and transfixing the maiden. When the dimness cleared away in whirling blots of color, he saw that Athlé, in a pose of statuesque rigidity, was still regarding the mirror with startled eyes. She had not moved; the wonder was frozen on her face; and it came to Tiglari that she was like the women who slept an enchanted slumber in the harem of Maal Dweb. Even as this thought occurred to him, he heard a ringing chorus of metallic voices that seemed to emanate from the graven demon heads of the columns.

‘The maiden Athlé,’ announced the voices in solemn and portentous tones, ‘has beheld herself in the mirror of Eternity, and has passed beyond the changes and corruptions of Time.’

Tiglari felt as if he were sinking into some obscure and terrible fen. He could comprehend nothing of what had befallen Athlé; and his own fate was an equally dark and dreadful enigma, beyond the solution of a simple hunter.

Now the blossoms had lifted about his shoulders, were laving his arms, his body. Beneath their abhorrent alchemy the transformation continued. A long fur sprang up on the thickening torso; the arms lengthened: they became simian; the hands took on a likeness to the feet. From the neck

downward, Tiglari differed in no wise from the apish creatures of the garden.

In helpless abject horror, he waited for the completion of the metamorphosis. Then he became aware that a man in sober garments, with eyes and mouth filled with the weariness of strange things, was standing before him. Behind the man were two of the sickle-handed iron automatons. In a somewhat languid voice, the man uttered an unknown word that vibrated in the air with prolonged mysterious aftertones. The circle of craning flowers drew back from Tiglari, resuming their former upright positions in a close hedge; and the wiry tendrils were withdrawn from his ankles. Hardly able to comprehend his release, he heard a sound of brazen voices, and knew dimly that the demon heads of the columns had spoken, saying:

‘The hunter Tiglari has been laved in the nectar of the blossoms of primordial life, and has become in all ways, from the neck downward, even as the beasts that he hunted.’

When the chorus ceased, the weary man in sober raiment came nearer and addressed him:

‘I, Maal Dweb, had planned to deal with you precisely as I dealt with Mocair and many others. Mocair was the beast that you met in the labyrinth, with new-made fur still sleek and wet from the liquor of the flowers; and you saw some of his predecessors about the palace. However, I find that my whims are not always the same. You, Tiglari, unlike the others shall at least remain a man from the neck upward; you are free to resume your wanderings in the labyrinth, and escape from it if you can. I do not wish to see you again, and my clemency springs from another reason than esteem for your kind. Go now: the maze has many windings which you are yet to traverse.’

A great awe was upon Tiglari; his native fierceness, his savage volition, were tamed by the enchanter's languid will. With one backward look of concern and wonder at Athlé, he withdrew obediently, slouching like a huge ape. His fur glistening wetly to the three suns, he vanished amid the labyrinth.

Maal Dweb, attended by his metal slaves, went over to the figure of Athlé, which still regarded the mirror with astonished eyes.

'Mong Lut,' he said, addressing by name the nearer of the two automatons at his heels, 'it has been, as you know, my caprice to eternalize the frail beauty of women. Athlé, like the others before her, has explored my ingenious maze, and has looked into that mirror whose sudden radiance turns the flesh to a stone fairer than marble and no less enduring... Also, as you know, it has been my whim to turn men into beasts with the copious fluid of certain artificial flowers, so that their outer semblance should conform more strictly to their inner nature. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I have done these things? Am I not Maal Dweb, in whom all knowledge and all power reside?'

'Yes, master,' echoed the automaton. 'You are Maal Dweb, the all-wise, the all-powerful, and it is well that you have done these things.'

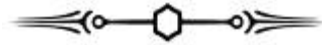
'However,' continued Maal Dweb, 'the repetition of even the most remarkable thaumaturgies can grow tiresome after a certain number of times. I do not think that I shall deal again in this fashion with any woman, or deal thus with any man. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I should vary my sorceries in future? Am I not Maal Dweb, the all resourceful?'

'Indeed, you are Maal Dweb,' agreed the automaton, 'and it would no doubt be well for you to diversify your enchantments.'

Maal Dweb was not ill pleased with the answers that the automaton had given. He cared little for converse, other than the iron echoing of his metal

servitors, who assented always to all that he said, and spared him the tedium of arguments. And it may have been that there were times when he wearied a little even of this, and preferred the silence of the petrified women, or the muteness of the beasts that could no longer call themselves men.

The Flower-Women



‘ATHLÉ,’ SAID MAAL Dweb, ‘I suffer from the frightful curse of omnipotence. In all Xiccarph, and in the five outer planets of the triple suns, there is no one, there is nothing, to dispute my domination. Therefore my ennui has become intolerable.’

The girlish eyes of Athlé regarded the enchanter with a gaze of undying astonishment, which, however, was not due to his strange avowal. She was the last of the fifty-one women that Maal Dweb had turned into statues in order to preserve their frail, corruptible beauty from the worm-like gnawing of time. Since, through a laudable desire to avoid monotony, he had resolved never to repeat again this particular sorcery, the magician had cherished Athlé with the affection which an artist feels for the final masterpiece of a series. He had placed her on a little dais, beside the ivory chair in his chamber of meditation. Often he addressed to her his queries or monologues; and the fact that she did not reply or even hear was to him a signal and unfailing recommendation.

‘There is but one remedy for this boredom of mine,’ he went on— ‘the abnegation, at least for a while, of that all too certain power from which it springs. Therefore, I, Maal Dweb, the ruler of six worlds and all their moons, shall go forth alone, unheralded, and without other equipment than that which any fledgling sorcerer might possess. In this way, perhaps I shall recover the lost charm of incertitude, the foregone enchantment of peril. Adventures that I have not foreseen will be mine, and the future will wear

the alluring veil of the mysterious. It remains, however, to select the field of my adventurings.'

Maal Dweb arose from his curiously carved chair and waved back the four automatons of iron, having the likeness of armed men, that sprang to attend him. He passed along the halls of his palace, where painted hangings told in vermillion and purple the dread legends of his power. Through ebon valves that opened noiselessly at the uttering of a high-pitched word, he entered the chamber in which was his planetarium.

The room was walled, floored, and vaulted with a dark crystal, full of tiny, numberless fires, that gave the illusion of unbounded space with all its stars. In midair, without chains or other palpable support, there hung an array of various globes that represented the three suns, the six planets, and thirteen moons of the system ruled by Maal Dweb. The miniature suns, amber, emerald, and carmine, bathed their intricately circling worlds with an illumination that reproduced at all times the diurnal conditions of the system itself; and the pigmy satellites maintained always their corresponding orbits and relative positions.

The sorcerer went forward, walking as if on some unfathomable gulf of night, with stars and galaxies beneath him. The poising worlds were level with his shoulders as he passed among them. Disregarding the globes that corresponded to Mornoth, Xiccarph, Ulassa, Nough, and Rhul, he came to Voltap, the outermost, which was then in aphelion on the farther side of the room.

Votalp, a large and moonless world, revolved imperceptibly as he studied it. For one hemisphere, he saw, the yellow sun was at that time in total eclipse behind the sun of carmine; but in spite of this, and its greater distance from the solar triad, Votalp was lit with sufficient clearness. It was mottled with strange hues like a great cloudy opal; and the mottlings were

microscopic oceans, isles, mountains, jungles, and deserts. Fantastic sceneries leapt into momentary salience, taking on the definitude and perspective of actual landscapes, and then faded back amid the iridescent blur. Glimpses of teeming, multifarious life, incredible tableaux, monstrous happenings, were beheld by Maal Dweb as he looked down like some celestial spy.

It seemed, however that he found little to divert or inveigle him in these outré doings and exotic wonders. Vision after vision rose before him, summoned and dismissed at will, as if he were turning the pages of a familiar volume. The wars of gigantic wyverns, the matings of half-vegetable monsters, the queer algae that had filled a certain ocean with their living and moving labyrinths, the remarkable spawn of certain polar glaciers: all these elicited no gleam or sparkle in his dulled eyes of blackish emerald.

At length, on that portion of the planet which was turning into the double dawn from its moonless night, he perceived an occurrence that drew and held his attention. For the first time, he began to calculate the precise latitude and longitude of the surrounding milieu.

‘There,’ he said to himself, ‘is a situation not without interest. In fact, the whole affair is quaint and curious enough to warrant my intervention. I shall visit Votalp.’

He withdrew from the planetarium and made a few preparations for his meditated journey. Having changed his robe of magisterial sable and scarlet for a hodden mantle, and having removed from his person every charm and talisman, with the exception of two phylacteries acquired during his novitiate, he went forth into the garden of his mountain-built palace. He left no instructions with the many retainers who served with him: for these

retainers were automatons of iron and brass, who would fulfill their various duties without injunction till he returned.

Traversing the curious labyrinth which he alone could solve, he came to the verge of the sheer mesa, where pythonlike lianas drooped into space, and metallic palms deployed their armaments of foliage against the far-flung horizons of the world Xiccarph. Empires and cities, lying supine beneath his magical dominion, were unrolled before him; but, giving them hardly a glance, he walked along the estrade of black marble at the very brink, till he reached a narrow promontory around which there hung at all times a deep and hueless cloud, obscuring the prospect of the lands below and beyond.

The secret of this cloud, affording access to multiple dimensions and deeply folded realms of space conterminous with far worlds, was known only to Maal Dweb. He had built a silver drawbridge on the promontory; and by lowering its airy span into the cloud, he could pass at will to the farther zones of Xiccarph, or could cross the very void between the planets.

Now, after making certain highly recondite calculations, he manipulated the machinery of the light drawbridge so that its other end would fall upon the particular terrain he desired to visit in Votalp. Then, assuring himself that his calculations and adjustments were flawless, he followed the silver span into the dim, bewildering chaos of the cloud. Here, as he groped in a gray blindness, it seemed that his body and members were drawn out over infinite gulfs, and were bent through impossible angles. A single misstep would have plunged him into spatial regions from which all his cunning sorcery could have contrived no manner of return or release; but he had often trod these hidden ways, and he did not lose his equilibrium. The transit appeared to involve whole centuries of time; but finally he emerged from the cloud and came to the farther end of the drawbridge.

Before him was the scene that had lured his interest in Votalp. It was a semi-tropic valley, level and open in the foreground, and rising steeply at the other extreme, with all its multiform fantasies of vegetation, toward the cliffs and chasms of sable mountains horned with blood-red stone. The time was still early dawn; but the amber sun, freeing itself slowly from the occultation of the sun of carmine, had begun to lighten the hues and shadows of the valley with strange copper and orange. The emerald sun was still below the horizon.

The terminus of the bridge had fallen on a mossy knoll, behind which the hueless cloud had gathered, even as about the promontory in Xiccarph. Maal Dweb descended the knoll, feeling no concern whatever for the bridge. It would remain as he had left it, till the time of his return; and if, in the interim, any creatures from Votalp should cross the gulf and invade his mountain citadel, they would meet a fearful doom in the snares and windings of the labyrinth; or, failing this, would be exterminated by his iron servitors.

As he went down the knoll into the valley, the enchanter heard an eery, plaintive singing, like that of sirens who bewail some irremediable misfortune. The singing came from a sisterhood of unusual creatures, half woman and half flower, that grew on the valley bottom beside a sleepy stream of purple water. There were several scores of these lovely and charming monsters, whose feminine bodies of pink and pearl reclined amid the vermilion velvet couches of billowing petals to which they were attached. These petals were borne on mattress-like leaves and heavy, short, well-rooted stems. The flowers were disposed in irregular circles, clustering thickly toward the center, and with open intervals in the outer rows.

Maal Dweb approached the flower-women with a certain caution; for he knew that they were vampires. Their arms ended in long tendrils, pale as

ivory, swifter and more supple than the coils of darting serpents, with which they were wont to secure the unwary victims drawn by their singing. Of course, knowing in his wisdom the inexorable laws of nature, he felt no disapproval of such vampirism; but, on the other hand, he did not care to be its object.

He circled about the strange family at a little distance, his movements hidden from their observation by their boulders overgrown with tall, luxuriant lichens of red and yellow. Soon he neared the straggling outer plants that were upstream from the knoll on which he had landed; and in confirmation of the vision beheld in the mimic world in his planetarium, he found that the turf was upheaved and broken where five of the blossoms, growing apart from their companions, had been disrooted and removed bodily. He had seen in his vision the rape of the fifth flower, and he knew that the others were now lamenting her.

Suddenly, as if they had forgotten their sorrow, the wailing of the flower-women turned to a wild and sweet and voluptuous singing, like that of the Lorelei. By this token, the enchanter knew that his presence had been detected. Inured though he was to such bewitchments, he found himself far from insensible to the perilous luring of the voices. Contrary to his intention, forgetful of the danger, he emerged from the lee of the lichen-crested rocks. By insidious degrees, the melody fired his blood with a strange intoxication, it sang in his brain like some bewildering wine. Step by step, with a temporary loss of prudence for which, later, he was quite unable to account, he approached the blossoms.

Now, pausing at an interval that he deemed safe in his bemusement, he beheld plainly the half-human features of the vampires, leaning toward him with fantastic invitation. Their weirdly slanted eyes, like oblong opals of dew and venom, the snaky coiling of their bronze-green hair, the bright,

baneful scarlet of their lips, that thirsted subtly even as they sang, awoke within him the knowledge of his peril. Too late, he sought to defy the captiously woven spell. Unwinding with a movement swift as light, the long pale tendrils of one of the creatures wrapped him round, and he was drawn, resisting vainly, toward her couch.

At the moment of his capture, the whole sisterhood had ceased their singing. They began to utter little cries of triumph, shrill and sibilant. Murmurs of expectation, like the purrings of hungry flame, arose from the nearest, who hoped to share in the good fortune of the sorcerer's captress.

Maal Dweb, however, was now able to utilize his faculties. Without alarm or fear, he contemplated the lovely monster who had drawn him to the verge of her velvet bed, and was fawning upon him with sinisterly parted lips.

Using a somewhat primary power of divination, he apprised himself of certain matters concerning the vampire. Having learnt the true, occult name which this creature shared with all others of her kind, he then spoke the name aloud in a firm but gentle tone; and winning thus, by an elemental law of magic, the power of mastery over his captress and her sisters, he felt the instant relaxation of the tendrils. The flower-woman, with fear and wonder in her strange eyes, drew back like a startled lamia; but Maal Dweb, employing the half-articulate sounds of her own language, began to soothe and reassure her. In a little while he was on friendly terms with the whole sisterhood. These simple and naive beings forgot their vampire intentions, their surprise and wonderment, and seemed to accept the magician very much as they accepted the three suns and the meteoric conditions of the planet Votalp.

Conversing with them, he soon verified the information obtained through the mimic globe. As a rule their emotions and memories were short-lived,

their nature being closer to that of plants or animals than of humankind; but the loss of five sisters, occurring on successive mornings, had filled them with grief and terror that they could not forget. The missing flowers had been carried away bodily. The depredators were certain reptilian beings, colossal in size and winged like pterodactyls, who came down from their new-built citadel among the mountains at the valley's upper extreme. These beings, known as the Ispazars, seven in number, had become formidable sorcerers and had developed an intellection beyond that of their kind, together with many esoteric faculties. Preserving the cold and evilly cryptic nature of reptiles, they had made themselves the masters of an abhuman science. But, until the present, Maal Dweb had ignored them and had not thought it worth while to interfere with their evolution.

Now, through an errant whim, in his search for adventure, he had decided to pit himself against the Ispazars, employing no other weapons of sorcery than his own wit and will, his remembered learning, his clairvoyance, and the two simple amulets that he wore on his person.

'Be comforted,' he said to the flower-women, 'for verily I shall deal with these miscreants in a fitting manner.'

At this; they broke into a shrill babble, repeating tales the bird-people of the valley had told them regarding the fortress of the Ispazars, whose walls rose sheerly from a hidden peak unscaled by man, and were void of portal or window save in the highmost ramparts, where the flying reptiles went in and out. And they told him other tales, concerning the ferocity and cruelty of the Ispazars...

Smiling as if at the chatter of children, he diverted their thoughts to other matters, and told them many stories of odd and curious marvels, and queer happenings in alien worlds. In the meanwhile he perfected his plan for obtaining entrance to the citadel of the reptilian wizards.

The day went by in such divertissements; and one by one the three suns of the system fell beyond the valley's rim. The flower-women grew inattentive, they began to nod and drowse in the richly darkening twilight; and Maal Dweb proceeded with certain preparations that formed an essential part of his scheme.

Through his power of second-sight, he had determined the identity of the victim whom the reptiles would carry away in their next raid, on the morrow. This creature, as it happened, was the one who had sought to ensnare him. Like the others, she was now preparing to fold herself for the night in her voluminous couch of petals. Confiding part of his plan to her, Maal Dweb manipulated in a singular fashion, one of the amulets which he wore, and by virtue of this manipulation, reduced himself to the proportions of a pigmy. In this state, with the assistance of the drowsy siren, he was able to conceal himself in a hollow space among the petals; and thus embowered, like a bee in a rose he slept securely through the short, moonless night of Votalp.

The dawn awakened him, glowing as if through lucent curtains of ruby and purple. He heard the flower-women murmuring sleepily to one another as they opened their blossoms to the early suns. Their murmurs, however, soon changed into shrill cries of agitation and fear; and above the cries, there came a vibrant drumming as of great dragonwings. He peered from his hiding-place and saw in the double dawn the descent of the Ispazars, from whose webbed vans a darkness fell on the valley. Nearer they drew, and he saw their cold and scarlet eyes beneath scaly brows, their long, undulant bodies, their lizard limbs, and prehensile claws; and he heard the deep, articulate hissing of their voices. Then the petals closed about him blindly, shuddering and constrictive, as the flower-women recoiled from the swooping monsters. All was confusion, terror, tumult; but he knew, from his

observation of the previous rape, that two of the Ispazars had encircled the flower's stem with their python-like tails, and were pulling it from the ground as a human sorcerer might pull a mandrake plant.

He felt the convulsive agony of the disrooted blossom, he heard the lamentable shrieking of her sisters. Then there came a heavier beating of the drum-loud wings, and the feeling of giddy ascension and flight.

Through all this, Maal Dweb maintained the utmost presence of mind; and he did not betray himself to the Ispazars. After many minutes, there was a slackening of the headlong flight, and he knew that the reptiles were nearing their citadel. A moment more, and the ruddy gloom of the shut petals darkened and purpled about him as if they had peered from the sunlight into a place of deep shadow. The thrumming of wings ceased abruptly, the living flower was dropped from a height on some hard surface and Maal Dweb was nearly hurled from his hiding place by the violence of her fall. Moaning faintly, twitching a little, she lay where her captors had flung her. The enchanter heard the hissing voices of the reptile wizards, the rough, sharp slithering of their tails on a stone floor, as they withdrew.

Whispering words of comfort to the dying blossom, he felt the petals relax about him. He crept forth very cautiously, and found himself in an immense, gloomily vaulted hall, whose windows were like the mouths of a deep cavern. The place was a sort of alchemy, a den of alien sorceries and abhorrent pharmaceuticals. Everywhere, in the gloom, there were vats, cupels, furnaces, alembics, and matrasses of unhuman form, bulking and towering colossally to the pigmy eyes of Maal Dweb. Close at hand, a monstrous cauldron fumed like a crater of black metal, its curving sides ascending far above the magician's head. None of the Ispazars was in sight; but, knowing that they might resume at any moment, he hastened to make

ready against them, feeling, for the first time in many years, the thrill of peril and expectation.

Manipulating the second amulet, he regained his normal proportions. The room, though still spacious, was no longer a hall of giants, and the cauldron beside him sank and lessened till its rim rose only to his shoulder. He saw now that the cauldron was filled with an unholy mixture of ingredients, among which were finely shredded portions of the missing flower-women, together with the gall of chimeras and the ambergris of leviathans. Heated by unseen fires, it boiled tumultuously, foaming with black, pitchy bubbles, and putting forth a nauseous vapor.

With the shrewd eye of a past master of all chemic lore, Maal Dweb proceeded to estimate the cauldron's various contents, and was then able to divine the purpose for which the brewage was intended. The conclusion to which he was driven appalled him slightly, and served to heighten his respect for the power and science of the reptile sorcerers. He saw, indeed, that it would be highly advisable to arrest their evolution.

After brief reflection, it occurred to him that, in accordance with chemical laws, the adding of certain simple components to the brewage would bring about, an eventuation neither desired nor anticipated by the Ispazars. On high tables about the walls of the alchemy, there were jars, flasks, and vials containing subtle drugs and powerful elements, some of which were drawn from the more arcanic kingdoms of nature. Disregarding the moon-powder, the coals of starfire, the jellies made from the brains of gorgons, the ichor of salamanders, the dust of lethal fungi, the marrow of sphinxes, and other equally quaint and pernicious matters, the magician soon found the essences that he required. It was the work of an instant to pour them into the seething cauldron; and having done this, he awaited with composure, the return of the reptiles.

The flower-woman, in the meanwhile, had ceased to moan and twitch. Maal Dweb knew that she was dead, since beings of this genus were unable to survive when uprooted with such violence from their natal soil. She had folded herself to the face in her straitened petals, as if in a red and blackening shroud. He regarded her briefly, not without commiseration; and at that moment he heard the voices of the seven Ispazars, who had now re-entered the alchemy.

They came toward him among the crowded vessels, walking erect in the fashion of men on their short lizard legs, their ribbed and sabled wings retracted behind them, and their eyes glaring redly in the gloom. Two of them were armed with long, sinuous-bladed knives; and others were equipped with enormous adamantine pestles, to be employed, no doubt, in bruising the flesh of the floral vampire.

When they saw the enchanter; they were both startled and angered. Their necks and torsos began to swell like the hoods of cobras, and a great hissing rose among them, like the noise of jetted steam. Their aspect would have struck terror to the heart of any common man; but Maal Dweb confronted them calmly, repeating aloud, in low, even tones, a word of sovereign protective power.

The Ispazars hurled themselves toward him, some running along the floor with an undulant slithering motion, and others rising on rapid-beating vans to attack him from above. All, however, dashed themselves vainly on the sphere of unseen force he had drawn about him through the utterance of the word of power. It was a strange thing to see them clawing vengefully at the void air, or striking futile, blows with their weapons, which rang as if on a brazen wall.

Now, perceiving that the man before them was a sorcerer, the reptile magicians began to make use of their own abhuman sorcery. They called

from the air great bolts of livid flame, python-shapen, which leaped and writhed incessantly, warring with the sphere of protective power, driving it back as a shield is driven by press of numbers in battle, but never breaking it down entirely. Also, they chanted evil, siblant runes that were designed to charm away the magician's memory, and cause him to forget his magic. Sore was the travail of Maal Dweb as he fought the serpent fires and runes; and blood mingled with the sweat of his brow from that endeavor. But still, as the bolts struck nearer and the singing loudened, he kept uttering the unforgotten word; and the word still protected him.

Now, above the snaky chanting, he heard the deep hiss of the cauldron, boiling more turbulently than before because of those matters which he had added to its contents. And he saw, between the ever-writhing bolts, that a more voluminous vapor, dark as the steam of a primal fen, was mounting from the cauldron and spreading throughout the alchemy.

Soon the Ispazars were immersed in the fumes, as in a cloud of darkness; and dimly they began to coil and twist, convulsed with a strange agony. The python flames died out on the air; and the hissings of the Ispazars became inarticulate as those of common serpents. Then falling to the floor, while the black mist gathered and thickened above them, they crawled to and fro on their bellies in the fashion of true reptiles; and, emerging at times from the vapor, they shrank and dwindled as if hell-fire had consumed them.

All this was even as Maal Dweb had planned. He knew that the Ispazars had forgotten their sorcery and science; and a swift devolution, flinging them back to the lowest state of serpenthood, had come upon them through the action of the vapor. But, before the completion of the change, he admitted one of the seven Ispazars to the sphere that now served to protect him from the fumes. The creature fawned at his feet like a tame dragon, acknowledging him for its master. Then, presently, the cloud of vapor began

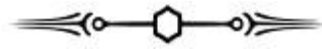
to lift, and he saw the other Ispazars, who were now little larger than fensnakes. Their wings had withered into useless frills, and they crept and hissed on the floor, amid the alembics and crucibles and athanors of their lost science.

Maal Dweb regarded them for a little, not without pride in his own sorcery. The struggle had been difficult, even dangerous; and he reflected that his boredom had been thoroughly overcome, at least for the nonce. From a practical standpoint, he had done well; for, in ridding the flower-women of their persecutors, he had also eradicated a possible future menace to his own dominion over the worlds of the three suns.

Turning to that Ispazar which he had spared for a necessary purpose, he seated himself firmly astride its back, behind the thick jointing of the vans. He spoke a magic word that was understood by the monster. Bearing him between its wings, it rose and flew obediently through one of the windows; and, leaving behind it for ever the citadel that was not to be scaled by man, nor by any wingless creature, it carried the magician over the red horns of the sable mountains, across the valley where dwelt the sisterhood of floral vampires, and descended on the mossy knoll at the end of that silver drawbridge whereby he had entered Votalp. There Maal Dweb dismounted; and, followed by the crawling Ispazar, he began his return journey to Xiccarph through the hueless cloud, above the multi-dimensional deeps.

Midway in that peculiar transit, he heard a sharp, sudden clapping of wings. It ceased with remarkable abruptness, and was not repeated. Looking back, he found that the Ispazar had fallen from the bridge, and was vanishing brokenly amid irreconcilable angles, in the gulf from which there was no return.

The Demon of the Flower



NOT AS THE plants and flowers of earth, growing peacefully beneath a simple sun, were the blossoms of the planet Lophai. Coiling and uncoiling in double dawns: tossing tumultuously under vast suns of jade green and balas-ruby orange: swaying and weltering in rich twilights, in aurora-curtained nights, they resembled fields of rooted serpents that dance eternally to an other-world music.

Many were small and furtive, and crept viperwise on the ground. Others were tall as pythons, rearing superbly in hieratic postures to the jeweled light. Some grew with single or dual stems that burgeoned forth into hydra beads. And some were frilled and festooned with leaves that suggested the wings of flying lizards, the pennants of faery lances, the phylacteries of a strange sacerdotalism. Some appeared to bear the scarlet wattles of dragons; others were tongued as if with black flames or the colored vapors that issue with weird writhings from out barbaric censers; and others still were armed with fleshy nets of tendrils, or with huge blossoms like bucklers perforated in battle. And all were equipped with venomous darts and fangs; all were alive, restless, and sentient.

They were the lords of Lophai, and all other life existed by their sufferance. The people of the world had been their inferiors from unrecorded cycles; and even in the most primitive myths there was no suggestion that any other order of things had ever prevailed.

And the plants themselves, together with the fauna and mankind of Lophai, gave immemorial obeisance to that supreme and terrible flower

known as the Voorqual, in which a tutelary demon, more ancient than the twin suns, was believed to have made its immortal avatar.

The Voorqual was served by a human priesthood, chosen from amid the royalty and aristocracy of Lophai. In the heart of the chief city, Lospar, in an equatorial realm, it had grown from antiquity on the summit of a high pyramid of sable terraces that loomed over the town like the hanging gardens of some greater Babylon, crowded with the lesser but deadly floral forms. At the center of the broad apex, the Voorqual stood alone in a basin level with the surrounding platform of black mineral. The basin was filled with a compost in which the dust of royal mummies formed an essential ingredient.

The demon flower sprang from a bulb so incrustated with the growth of ages that it resembled a stone urn. Above this there rose the gnarled stalk that had displayed in earlier times the bifurcation of a mandrake, but whose halves had now grown together into a scaly, furrowed thing like the tail of some mythic sea monster. The stalk was variegated with hues of greening bronze, of antique copper, with the livid blues and purples of fleshly corruption. It ended in a crown of stiff, blackish leaves, banded and spotted with poisonous, metallic white, and edged with sharp serrations as of savage weapons. From below the crown issued a long, sinuous arm, scaled like the main stem, and serpentineing downward and outward to terminate in the huge upright bowl of a bizarre blossom — as if the arm, in sardonic fashion, should hold out a hellish beggar's cup.

Abhorrent and monstrous was the bowl — which, like the leaves, was legended to renew itself at intervals of a thousand years. It smoldered with sullen ruby at the base; it lightened into zones of dragon's-blood, into belts of the rose of infernal sunset, on the full, swelling sides; and it flamed at the rim to a hot, yellowish nacarat red, like the ichor of salamanders. To one

who dared peer within, the cup was lined with sepulchral violet, blackening toward the bottom, pitted with myriad pores, and streaked with turgescient veins of sulphurous green.

Swaying in a slow, lethal, hypnotic rhythm, with a deep and solemn sibilation, the Voorqual dominated the city of Lospar and the world Lophai. Below, on the tiers of the pyramid, the thronged ophidian plants kept time to this rhythm in their tossing and hissing. And far beyond Lospar, to the poles of the planet and in all its longitudes, the living blossoms obeyed the sovereign tempo of the Voorqual.

Boundless was the power exercised by this being over the people who, for want of a better name, I have called the humankind of Lophai. Myriad and frightful were the legends that had gathered through æons about the Voorqual. And dire was the sacrifice demanded each year at the summer solstice by the demon; the filling of its proffered cup with the life blood of a priest or priestess, chosen from amid the assembled hierophants who passed before the Voorqual till the poised cup, inverted and empty, descended like a devil's miter on the head of one of their number.

Lunithi, king of the realms about Lospar and high priest of the Voorqual, was the last, if not the first, of his race to rebel against this singular tyranny. There were dim myths of some primordial ruler who had dared to refuse the required sacrifice, and whose people, in consequence, had been decimated by a mortal war with the serpentine plants which, obeying the demon, had uprooted themselves everywhere from the soil and had marched on the cities of Lophai, slaying or vampirizing all who fell in their way.

Lunithi, from childhood, had obeyed implicitly and without question the will of the floral overlord; had offered the stated worship, had performed the necessary rites. To withhold them would have been blasphemy. He had not dreamed of rebellion till, at the time of the annual choosing of the

victim, and thirty suns before the date of his nuptials with Nala, priestess of the Voorqual, he saw the hesitant, inverted grail come down in deathly crimson on the fair head of his betrothed.

A sorrowful consternation, a dark, sullen dismay which he sought to smother in his heart, was experienced by Lunithi. Nala, dazed and resigned, in a mystic inertia of despair, accepted her doom without question; but a blasphemous doubt formed itself surreptitiously in the mind of the king.

Trembling with his own impiety, he asked himself if there was not some way in which he could save Nala, could cheat the demon of its ghastly tribute. To do this, and escape with impunity to himself and his subjects, he knew that he must strike at the very life of the monster, which was believed to be deathless and invulnerable. It seemed impious even to wonder concerning the truth of this belief, which had long assumed the force of a religious tenet and was held unanimously.

Amid such reflections, Lunithi remembered an old myth about the existence of a neutral and independent being known as the Occlith, a demon coeval with the Voorqual, and allied neither to man nor the flower creatures. This being was said to dwell beyond the desert of Aphorn, in the otherwise unpeopled mountains of white stone above the habitat of the ophidian blossoms. In latter days no man had seen the Occlith, for the journey through Aphorn was not lightly to be undertaken. But this entity was supposed to be immortal; and it kept apart and alone, meditating upon all things but interfering never with their processes. However, it was said to have given, in earlier times, valuable advice to a certain king who had gone forth from Lospar to its lair among the white crags.

In his grief and desperation, Lunithi resolved to seek the Occlith and question it about the possibility of slaying the Voorqual. If, by any mortal means, the demon could be destroyed, he would remove from Lophai the

long-established tyranny whose shadow fell upon all things from the sable pyramid.

It was necessary for him to proceed with utmost caution, to confide in no one, to veil his very thoughts at all times from the occult scrutiny of the Voorqual. In the interim of five days between the choosing of the victim and the consummation of the sacrifice, he must carry out his mad plan.

Unattended, and disguised as a simple hunter of beasts, he left his palace during the short three-hour night of universal slumber, and stole forth toward the desert of Aphorn. In the dawn of the balas-ruby sun, he had reached the pathless waste, and was toiling painfully over its knife-sharp ridges of dark stone, like the waves of a mountain ocean petrified in storm.

Soon the rays of the green sun were added to those of the other, and Aphorn became a painted inferno through which Lunithi dragged his way, crawling from scarp to glassy scarp or resting at whiles in the colored shadows. There was no water anywhere; but swift mirages gleamed and faded, and the sifting sand appeared to run like rills in the bottom of deep valleys.

At setting of the first sun, he came within sight of the pale mountains beyond Aphorn, towering like cliffs of frozen foam above the desert's dark sea. They were tinged with transient lights of azure, of jade and orange in the going of the yellow-red orb and the westward slanting of its binary. Then the lights melted into beryl and tourmaline, and the green sun was regnant over all, until it, too, went down, leaving a twilight whose colors were those of sea water. In the gloom, Lunithi reached the foot of the pale crags; and there, exhausted, he slept till the second dawn.

Rising, he began his escalade of the white mountains. They rose bleak and terrible before him against the hidden suns, with cliffs that were like the sheer terraces of gods. Like the king who had preceded him in the ancient

myth, he found a precarious way that led upward through narrow, broken chasms. At last he came to the vaster fissure, riving the heart of the white range, by which it was possible to reach the legendary lair of the Occlith.

The chasm's beetling walls rose higher and higher above him, shutting out the suns but creating with their whiteness a wan and deathly glimmer to illumine his way. The fissure was such as might have been cloven by the sword of a macrocosmic giant. It led downward, steepening ever, like a wound that pierced to the heart of Lophai.

Lunithi, like all of his race, was able to exist for prolonged periods without other nutriment than sunlight and water. He had brought with him a metal flask, filled with the aqueous element of Lophai, from which he drank sparingly as he descended the chasm; for the white mountains were waterless, and he feared to touch the pools and streams of unknown fluids upon which he came at intervals in the dusk.

There were sanguine-colored springs that fumed and bubbled before him, to vanish in fathomless rifts; and brooklets of mercurial metal, green, blue, or amber, that wound beside him like liquescent serpents and then slipped away into dark caverns. Acrid vapors rose from clefts in the chasm; and Lunithi felt himself among strange chemistries of nature. In this fantastic world of stone, which the plants of Lophai could never invade, he seemed to have gone beyond the Voorqual's grim, diabolic tyranny.

At last he came to a clear, watery pool, occupying almost the entire width of the chasm. In passing it he was forced to scramble along a narrow, insecure ledge at one side. A fragment of the marble stone, breaking away beneath his footfall, dropped into the pool as he gained the opposite edge; and the hueless liquid foamed and hissed like a thousand vipers. Wondering as to its properties, and fearful of the venomous hissing, which did not

subside for some time, Lunithi hurried on, and came after an interval to the fissure's end.

Here he emerged in the huge craterlike pit that was the home of the Occlith. Fluted and columned walls went up to a stupendous height on all sides; and the sun of orange ruby, now at zenith, was pouring down a vertical cataract of gorgeous fires and shadows.

Addorsed against the farther wall of the pit in an upright posture, he beheld that being known as the Occlith, which had the likeness of a high cruciform pillar of blue mineral, shining with its own esoteric luster. Going forward, he prostrated himself before the pillar; and then, in accents that quavered with a deep awe, he ventured to ask the desired oracle.

For a while the Occlith maintained its æon-old silence. Peering timidly, the king perceived the twin lights of mystic silver that brightened and faded with a slow, rhythmic pulsation in the arms of the blue cross. Then, from the lofty, shining thing, there issued a voice that was like the tinkling of mineral fragments lightly clashed together, but which somehow shaped itself into articulate words.

“It is possible,” said the Occlith, “to slay the plant known as the Voorqual, in which an elder demon has its habitation. Though the flower has attained millennial age, it is not necessarily immortal; for all things have their proper term of existence and decay, and nothing has been created without its corresponding agency of death. I do not advise you to slay the plant, but I can furnish you with the information which you desire. In the mountain chasms through which you came to seek me, there flows a hueless spring of mineral poison, deadly to all the ophidian plant life of this world.”

The Occlith went on and told Lunithi the method by which the poison should be prepared and administered. The chill, toneless, tinkling voice concluded:

“I have answered your question. If there is anything more that you wish to learn, it would be well to ask me now.”

Prostrating himself again, Lunithi gave thanks to the Occlith; and, considering that he had learned all that was requisite, he did not avail himself of the opportunity to question further the strange entity of living stone. And the Occlith, cryptic and aloof in its termless, impenetrable meditation, apparently saw fit to vouchsafe nothing more except in answer to a direct query.

Withdrawing from the marble-walled abyss, Lunithi returned in haste along the chasm till, reaching the pool of which the Occlith had spoken, he paused to empty his flask and fill it with the angry, hissing liquid. Then he resumed his homeward journey.

At the end of two days, after incredible fatigues and torments in the blazing hell of Aphorn, he reached Lospar in the time of darkness and slumber, as when he had departed. Since his absence had been unannounced, it was supposed that he had retired to the underground adyta below the pyramid of the Voorqual for purposes of prolonged meditation, as was sometimes his wont.

In alternate hope and trepidation, dreading the miscarriage of his plan and shrinking still from its audacious impiety, Lunithi awaited the night preceding that double dawn of summer solstice when, in a secret room of the black pyramid, the monstrous offering was to be made ready. Nala would be slain by a fellow priest or priestess, chosen by lot, and her blood would drip from the channeled altar into a great cup, and the cup would then be carried with solemn rites to the Voorqual and its contents poured into the evilly supplicative bowl of the sanguinated blossom.

He saw little of Nala during that interim. She was more withdrawn than ever, and seemed to have consecrated herself wholly to the coming doom.

To no one — and least of all to his beloved — did Lunithi dare to hint a possible prevention of the sacrifice.

There came the dreaded eve, with a swiftly changing twilight of jeweled hues that turned to a darkness hung with auroral flame.

Lunithi stole across the sleeping city and entered the pyramid whose blackness towered massively amid the frail architecture of buildings that were little more than canopies and lattices of stone. With infinite care and caution he made the preparations prescribed by the Occlith. Into the huge sacrificial cup of black metal, in a room lit with stored sunlight, he emptied the seething, sibilant poison he had brought with him from the white mountains. Then, opening adroitly a vein in one of his arms, he added a certain amount of his own blood to the lethal potion, above whose foaming crystal it floated like a magic oil, without mingling; so that the entire cup, to all appearance, was filled with the liquid most acceptable to the Satanic blossom.

Bearing in his hands the black grail, Lunithi ascended a hewn stairway that led to the Voorqual's presence. His heart quailing, his senses swooning in chill gulfs of terror, he emerged on the lofty summit above the shadowy town.

In a luminous azure gloom, against the weird and iridescent streamers of light that foreran the double dawn, he saw the dreamy swaying of the monstrous plant, and heard its somnolent hissing that was answered drowsily by myriad blossoms on the tiers below. A nightmare oppression, black and tangible, seemed to flow from the pyramid and to lie in stagnant shadow on all the lands of Lophai.

Aghast at his own temerity, and deeming that his shrouded thoughts would surely be understood as he drew nearer, or that the Voorqual would be suspicious of an offering brought before the accustomed hour, Lunithi

made obeisance to his floral suzerain. The Voorqual vouchsafed no sign that it had deigned to perceive his presence; but the great flower cup, with its flaring crimsons dulled to garnet and purple in the twilight, was held forward as if in readiness to receive the hideous gift.

Breathless, and fainting with religious fear, in a moment of suspense that scented eternal, Lunithi poured the blood-mantled poison into the cup. The venom boiled and hissed like a wizard's brew as the thirsty flower drank it up; and Lunithi saw the scaled arm draw back, tilting its demon grail quickly as if to repudiate the doubtful potion.

It was too late; for the poison had been absorbed by the blossom's porous lining. The tilting motion changed in midair to an agonized writhing of the reptilian arm; and then the Voorqual's huge, scaly stalk and pointed leaf-crown began to toss in a deathly dance, waving darkly against the auroral curtains of morn. Its deep hissing sharpened to an insupportable note, fraught with the pain of a dying devil; and, looking down from the platform edge on which he crouched to avoid the swaying growth, Lunithi saw that the lesser plants on the terraces were now tossing in a mad unison with their master. Like noises in an ill dream, he heard the chorus of their tortured sibilations.

He dared not look again at the Voorqual, till he became aware of a strange silence, and saw that the blossoms below had ceased to writhe and were drooping limply on their stems. Then, incredulous, he knew that the Voorqual was dead.

Turning in triumph mingled with horror, he beheld the flaccid stalk that had fallen prone on its bed of unholy compost. He saw the sudden withering of the stiff, sworded leaves, of the gross and hellish cup. Even the stony bulb appeared to collapse and crumble before his eyes. The entire stem, its

evil colors fading swiftly, shrank and fell in upon itself like a sere, empty serpent skin.

At the same time, in some obscure manner, Lunithi was still aware of a presence that brooded above the pyramid. Even in the death of the Voorqual, it seemed to him that he was not alone.

Then, as he stood and waited, fearing he knew not what, he felt the passing of a cold and unseen thing in the gloom — a thing that flowed across his body like the thick coils of some enormous python, without sound, in dark, clammy undulations. A moment more and it was gone, and Lunithi no longer felt the brooding presence.

He turned to go; but it seemed that the dying night was full of an unconceived terror that gathered before him as he went down the long, somber stairs. Slowly he descended, and a weird despair was upon him. He had slain the Voorqual, had seen it wither in death. Yet he could not believe the thing he had done; the lifting of the ancient doom was still no more than an idle myth.

The twilight brightened as he passed through the slumbering city. According to custom, no one would be abroad for another hour. Then the priests of the Voorqual would gather for the annual blood offering.

Midway between the pyramid and his own palace, Lunithi was more than startled to meet the maiden Nala. Pale and ghostly, she glided by him with a swift and swaying movement almost serpentine, which differed oddly from her habitual languor. Lunithi dared not accost her when he saw her shut, unheeding eyes, like those of a somnambulist; and he was awed and troubled by the strange ease, the unnatural surety of her motion, which reminded him of something which he feared to remember. In a turmoil of fantastic doubt, he followed.

Threading the exotic maze of Lospar with the fleet and sinuous glide of a homing serpent, Nala entered the sacred pyramid. Lunithi, less swift than she, had fallen behind; and he knew not where she had gone in the myriad vaults and chambers; but a dark and fearsome intuition drew his steps without delay to the platform of the summit.

He knew not what he should find; but his heart was drugged with an esoteric hopelessness, and he was aware of no surprise when he came forth in the dawn and beheld the thing which awaited him.

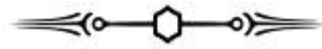
The maiden Nala — or that which he knew to be Nala — was standing in the basin of evil compost, above the withered remains of the Voorqual. She had undergone — was still undergoing — a monstrous and diabolic metamorphosis.

Her frail, slight body had assumed a long and dragonlike shape, and the tender skin was marked off in incipient scales that darkened with a mottling of baleful hues. Her head was no longer recognizable as such, and the human lineaments were flaring into a weird semicircle of pointed leaf buds. Her lower limbs had joined together, had rooted themselves in the ground. One of her arms was becoming a part of the reptilian bole, and the other was lengthening into a scaly stem that bore the dark-red bud of a sinister blossom.

More and more the monstrosity took on the similitude of the Voorqual; and Lunithi, crushed by the ancient awe and dark, terrible faith of his ancestors, could feel no longer any doubt of its true identity. Soon there was no trace of Nala in the thing before him, which began to sway with a sinuous, pythonlike rhythm, and to utter a deep and measured sibilation, to which the plants on the lower tiers responded.

He knew then that the Voorqual had returned to claim its sacrifice and preside forever above the city Lospar and the world Lophai.

The Plutonian Drug



‘IT IS REMARKABLE.’ said Dr. Manners, ‘how the scope of our pharmacopoeia has been widened by interplanetary exploration. In the past thirty years, hundreds of hitherto unknown substances, employable as drugs or medical agents, have been found in the other worlds of our own system. It will be interesting to see what the Allan Farquar expedition will bring back from the planets of Alpha Centaurt when — or if — it succeeds in reaching them and returning to earth. I doubt, though, if anything more valuable than selenine will be discovered. Selenine, derived from a fossil lichen found by the first rocket-expedition to the moon in 1975, has, as you know, practically wiped out the old-time curse of cancer. In solution, it forms the base of an infallible serum, equally useful for cure or prevention.’

‘I fear I haven’t kept up on a lot of the new discoveries,’ said Rupert Balcoth the sculptor, Manners’ guest, a little apologetically. ‘Of course, everyone has heard of selenine. And I’ve seen frequent mention, recently, of a mineral water from Ganymede whose effects are like those of the mythical Fountain of Youth.’

‘You mean clithni, as the stuff is called by the Ganymedians. It is a clear, emerald liquid, rising in lofty geysers from the craters of quiescent volcanoes. Scientists believe that the drinking of clithni is the secret of the almost fabulous longevity of the Ganymedians; and they think that it may prove to be a similar elixir for humanity.’

‘Some of the extraplaetary drugs haven’t been so beneficial to mankind, have they?’ queried Balcoth. ‘I seem to have heard of a Martian poison that has greatly facilitated the gentle art of murder. And I am told that mnophka,

the Venerian narcotic, is far worse, in its effects on the human system, than is any terrestrial alkaloid.'

'Naturally,' observed the doctor with philosophic calm, 'many of these new chemical agents are capable of due abuse. They share that liability with any number of our native drugs. Man, as ever; has the choice of good and evil... I suppose that the Martian poison you speak of is akpaloli, the juice of a common russet-yellow weed that grows in the oases of Mars. It is colorless, and without taste or odor. It kills almost instantly, leaving no trace, and imitating closely the symptoms of heart-disease. Undoubtedly many people have been made away with by means of a surreptitious drop of akpaloli in their food or medicine. But even akpaloli, if used in infinitesimal doses, is a very powerful stimulant, useful in cases of syncope, and serving, not infrequently to re-animate victims of paralysis in a quite miraculous manner.

'Of course,' he went on, 'there is an infinite lot still to be learned about many of these ultra-terrene substances. Their virtues have often been discovered quite by accident — and in some cases, the virtue is still to be discovered.

'For example, take mnophka, which you mentioned a little while ago. Though allied in a way, to the earthnarcotics, such as opium and hashish, it is of little use for anaesthetic or anodyne purposes. Its chief effects are an extraordinary acceleration of the time-sense, and a heightening and telescoping of all sensations, whether pleasurable or painful. The user seems to be living and moving at a furious whirlwind rate — even though he may in reality be lying quiescent on a couch. He exists in a headlong torrent of sense-impressions, and seems, in a few minutes, to undergo the experiences of years. The physical result is lamentable — a profound exhaustion, and an actual aging of the tissues, such as would ordinarily

require the period of real time which the addict has “lived” through merely in his own illusion.

‘There are some other drugs, comparatively little known, whose effects, if possible, are even more curious than those of mnophka. I don’t suppose you have ever heard of plutonium?’

‘No, I haven’t,’ admitted Balcoth. ‘Tell me about it.’

‘I can do even better than that — I can show you some of the stuff, though it isn’t much to look at — merely a fine white powder.’

Dr. Manners rose from the pneumatic-cushioned chair in which he sat facing his guest, and went to a large cabinet of synthetic ebony, whose shelves were crowded with flasks, bottles, tubes, and cartons of various sizes and forms. Returning, he handed to Balcoth a squat and tiny vial, twothirds filled with a starchy substance.

‘Plutonium,’ explained Manners, ‘as its name would indicate, comes from forlorn, frozen Pluto, which only one terrestrial expedition has so far visited — the expedition led by the Cornell brothers, John and Augustine, which started in 1990 and did not return to earth till 1996, when nearly everyone had given it up as lost. John, as you may have heard, died during the returning voyage, together with half the personnel of the expedition: and the others reached earth with only one reserve oxygen-tank remaining.

This vial contains about a tenth of the existing supply of plutonium. Augustine Cornell, who is an old schoolfriend of mine gave it to me three years ago, just before he embarked with the Allan Farquar crowd. I count myself pretty lucky to own anything so rare.

‘The geologists of the party found the stuff when they began prying beneath the solidified gases that cover the surface of that dim, starlit planet, in an effort to learn a little about its composition and history. They couldn’t do much under the circumstances, with limited time and equipment; but

they made some curious discoveries — of which plutonium was far from being the least.

‘Like selenine, the stuff is a bi-product of vegetable fossilization. Doubtless it is many billion years old, and dates back to the time when Pluto possessed enough internal heat to make possible the development of certain rudimentary plant-forms on its blind surface. It must have had an atmosphere then; though no evidence of former animal-life was found by the Cornells.

‘Plutonium, in addition to carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen, contains minute quantities of several unclassified elements. It was discovered in a crystalloid condition, but turned immediately to the fine powder that you see, as soon as it was exposed to air in the rocketship. It is readily soluble in water, forming a permanent colloid, without the least sign of deposit, no matter how long it remains in suspension.’

‘You say it is a drug?’ queried Balcoth. ‘What does it do to you?’

‘I’ll come to that in a minute — though the effect is pretty hard to describe. The properties of the stuff were discovered by chance: on the return journey from Pluto, a member of the expedition, half delirious with space-fever, got hold of the unmarked jar containing it and took a small dose, imagining that it was bromide of potassium. It served to complicate his delirium for a while — since it gave him some brand-new ideas about space and time.

‘Other people have experimented with it since then. The effects are quite brief (the influence never lasts more than half an hour) and they vary considerably with the individual. There is no bad aftermath, either neural, mental, or physical, as far as anyone has been able to determine. I’ve taken it myself, once or twice, and can testify to that.

‘Just what it does to one, I am not sure. Perhaps it merely produces a derangement or metamorphosis of sensations, like hashish; or perhaps it serves to stimulate some rudimentary organ, some dormant sense of the human brain. At any rate there is, as clearly as I can put it, an altering of the perception of time — of actual duration — into a sort of space-perception. One sees the past, and also the future, in relation to one’s own physical self, like a landscape stretching away on either hand. You don’t see very far, it is true — merely the events of a few hours in each direction; but it’s a very curious experience; and it helps to give you a new slant on the mystery of time and space. It is altogether different from the delusions of mnophka.’

‘It sounds very interesting,’ admitted Balcoth. ‘However, I’ve never tampered much with narcotics myself; though I did experiment once or twice, in my young, romantic days with cannabis Indica. I had been reading Gautiet and Baudelaire, I suppose. Anyway, the result was rather disappointing.’

‘You didn’t take it long enough for your system to absorb a residuum of the drug, I imagine,’ said Manners. ‘Thus the effects were negligible, from a visionary standpoint. But plutonium is altogether different — you get the maximum result from the very first dose. I think it would interest you greatly, Balcoth, since you are a sculptor by profession: you would see some unusual plastic images, not easy to render in terms of Euclidean planes and angles. I’d gladly give you a pinch of it now, if you’d care to experiment.’

‘You’re pretty generous, aren’t you, since the stuff is so rare?’

‘I’m not being generous at all. For years, I’ve planned to write a monograph on ultra-terrestrial narcotics; and you might give me some valuable data. With your type of brain and your highly developed artistic sense, the visions of plutonium should be uncommonly clear and

significant. All I ask is, that you describe them to me as fully as you can afterwards.'

'Very well,' agreed Balcoth. 'I'll try anything once.' His curiosity was inveigled, his imagination seduced, by Manner's account of the remarkable drug.

Manners brought out an antique whisky-glass, which he filled nearly to the rim with some golden-red liquid. Uncorking the vial of plutonium, he added to this fluid a small pinch of the fine white powder, which dissolved immediately and without effervescence.

'The liquid is a wine made from a sweet Martian tuber known as ovvra,' he explained. 'It is light and harmless, and will counteract the bitter taste of the plutonium. Drink, it quickly and then lean back in your chair.'

Balcoth hesitated, eyeing the golden-red fluid.

'Are you quite sure the effects will wear off as promptly as you say?' he questioned. 'It's a quarter past nine now, and I'll have to leave about ten to keep an appointment with one of my patrons at the Belvedere Club. It's the billionaire, Claud Wishhaven, who wants me to do a bas-relief in pseudo-jade and neo-jasper for the hall of his country mansion. He wants something really advanced and futuristic. We're to talk it over tonight — decide on the motifs, etc.'

"That gives you forty-five minutes," assured the doctor— 'and in thirty, at the most your brain and senses will be perfectly normal again. I've never known it to fail. You'll have fifteen minutes to spare, in which to tell me all about your sensations.'

Balcoth emptied the little antique glass at a gulp and leaned back, as Manners had directed, on the deep pneumatic cushions of the chair; He seemed to be falling easily but endlessly into a mist that had gathered in the room with unexplainable rapidity; and through this mist he was dimly

aware that Manners had taken the empty glass from his relaxing fingers. He saw the face of Manners far above him, small and blurred, as if in some tremendous perspective of alpine distance; and the doctor's simple action seemed to be occurring in another world.

He continued to fall and float through eternal mist, in which all things were dissolved as in the primordial nebulae of chaos. After a timeless interval, the mist which had been uniformly gray and hueless at first, took on a flowing iridescence, never the same for two successive moments; and the sense of gentle falling turned to a giddy revolution, as if he were caught in an ever-accelerating vortex.

Coincidentally with his movement in this whirlpool of prismatic splendor, he seemed to undergo an indescribable mutation of the senses. The whirling colors, by subtle, ceaseless gradations, became recognizable as solid forms. Emerging, as if by an act of creation, from the infinite chaos, they appeared to take their place in an equally infinite vista. The feeling of movement, through decrescent spirals, was resolved into absolute immobility. Balcoth was no longer conscious of himself as a living organic body: he was an abstract eye, a discorporate center of visual awareness, stationed alone in space, and yet having an intimate relationship with the frozen prospect on which he peered from his ineffable vantage.

Without surprise, he found that he was gazing simultaneously in two directions. On either hand, for a vast distance that was wholly void of normal perspective, a weird and peculiar landscape stretched away, traversed by an unbroken frieze or bas-relief of human figures that ran like a straight undeviating wall.

For awhile, the frieze was incomprehensible to Balcoth, he could make nothing of its glacial, flowing outlines with their background of repeated masses and complicated angles and sections of other human friezes that

approached or departed, often in a very abrupt manner, from an unseen world beyond. Then the vision seemed to resolve and clarify itself, and he began to understand.

The bas-relief, he saw, was composed entirely of a repetition of his own figure; plainly distinct as the separate waves of a stream, and possessing a stream-like unity. Immediately before him, and for some distance on either hand, the figure was seated in a chair — the chair itself being subject to the same billowy repetition. The background was composed of the reduplicated figure of Dr. Manners, in another chair; and behind this, the manifold images of a medicine cabinet and a section of wall-paneling.

Following the vista on what, for lack of any better name, might be termed the left hand, Balcoth saw himself in the act of draining the antique glass, with Manners standing before him. Then, still further, he saw himself previous to this, with a background in which Manners was presenting him the glass, was preparing the dose of plutonium, was going to the cabinet for the vial, was rising from his pneumatic chair. Every movement, every attitude of the doctor and himself during their past conversation, was visioned in a sort of reverse order, reaching away, unalterable as a wall of stone sculpture, into the weird, eternal landscape. There was no break in the continuity of his own figure; but Manners seemed to disappear at times, as if into a fourth dimension. These times, he remembered later, were the occasions when the doctor had not been in his line of vision. The perception was wholly visual; and though Balcoth saw his own lips and those of Manner's parted in movements of speech, he could hear no word or other sound.

Perhaps the most singular feature of the vision was the utter absence of foreshortening. Though Balcoth seemed to behold it all from a fixed, immovable point, the landscape and the intersecting frieze presented

themselves to him without diminution, maintaining a frontal fullness and distinctness to a distance that might have been many miles.

Continuing along the left-hand vista, he saw himself entering Manners' apartments, and then encountered his image standing in the elevator that had borne him to the ninth floor of the hundred story hotel in which Manners lived. Then the frieze appeared to have an open street for background, with a confused, everchanging multitude of other faces and forms, of vehicles and sections of buildings, all jumbled together as in some old-time futuristic painting. Some of these details were full and clear, and others were cryptically broken, and blurred, so as to be scarcely recognizable. Everything, whatever its spatial position and relation, was rearranged in the flowing frozen stream of this temporal pattern.

Balcoth retraced the three blocks from Manners' hotel to his own studio, seeing all his past movements, whatever their direction in tri-dimensional space, as a straight line in the time-dimension. At last he was in his studio; and there the frieze of his own figure receded into the eerie prospect of space-transmuted time among other friezes formed of actual sculptures. He beheld himself giving the final touches with his chisel to a symbolic statue at the afternoon's end, with a glare of ruddy sunset falling through an unseen window and flushing the pallid marble. Beyond this there was a reverse fading of the glow, a thickening and blurring of the half-chiselled features of the image, a female form to which he had given the tentative name of Oblivion. At length, among half-seen statuary, the left-hand vista became indistinct, and melted slowly in amorphous mist. He had seen his own life as a continuous glaciated stream, stretching for about five hours into the past.

Reaching away on the right hand, he saw the vista of the future. Here there was a continuation of his seated figure under the influence of the drug,

opposite the continued basrelief of Dr. Manners and the repeated cabinet and wallpanels. After a considerable interval, he beheld himself in the act of rising from the chair. Standing erect, he seemed to be talking awhile, as in some silent antique film, to the listening doctor. After that, he was shaking hands with Manners, was leaving the apartment, was descending in the lift and following the open brightly-lighted street toward the Belvedere Club where he was to keep his appointment with Claud Wishhaven.

The Club was only three blocks away, on another street; and the shortest route, after the first block, was along a narrow alley between an office building and a warehouse. Balcoth had meant to take this alley; and in his vision, he saw the bas-relief of his future figure passing along the straight pavement with a background of deserted doorways and dim walls that towered from sight against the extinguished stars.

He seemed to be alone: there were no passers — only the silent, glimmering endlessly repeated angles of arc-lit walls and windows that accompanied his repeated figure. He saw himself following the alley, like a stream in some profound canyon; and there midway, the strange vision came to an abrupt inexplicable end, without the gradual blurring into formless mist, that had marked his retrospective view of the past.

The sculpture-like frieze with its architectural ground appeared to terminate, broken off clean and sharp, in a gulf of immeasurable blackness and nullity. The last wave-like duplication of his own person, the vague doorway beyond it, the glimmering alley-pavement, all were seen as if shorn asunder by a falling sword of darkness, leaving a vertical line of cleavage beyond which there was — nothing.

Balcoth had a feeling of utter detachment from himself, an eloignement from the stream of time, from the shores of space, in some abstract dimension. The experience, in its full realization, might have lasted for an

instant only — or for eternity. Without wonder, without curiosity or reflection, like a fourth-dimensional Eye, he viewed simultaneously the unequal cross-sections of his own past and future.

After that timeless interval of complete perception, there began a reverse process of change. He, the all-seeing eye, aloof in super-space, was aware of movement, as if he were drawn back by some subtle thread of magnetism into the dungeon of time and space from which he had momentarily departed. He seemed to be following the frieze of his own seated body toward the right, with a dimly felt rhythm or pulsation in his movement that corresponded to the merging duplications of the figure. With curious clearness, he realized that the time-unit, by which these duplications were determined, was the beating of his own heart.

Now with accelerative swiftness, the vision of petrific form and space was re-dissolving into a spiral swirl of multitudinous colors, through which he was drawn upward. Presently he came to himself, seated in the pneumatic chair, with Dr. Manners opposite. The room seemed to waver a little, as if with some lingering touch of the weird transmutation; and webs of spinning iris hung in the corners of his eyes. Apart from this, the effect of the drug had wholly vanished, leaving, however, a singularly clear and vivid memory of the almost ineffable experience.

Dr. Manners began to question him at once, and Balcoth described his visionary sensations as fully and graphically as he could.

‘There is one thing I don’t understand,’ said Manners at the end with a puzzled frown. ‘According to your account, you must have seen five or six hours of the past, running in a straight spatial line, as a sort of continuous landscape; but the vista of the future ended sharply after you had followed it for three-quarters of an hour; or less. I’ve never known the drug to act so

unequally: the past and future perspectives have always been about the same in their extent for others who have used plutonium.'

'Well,' observed Balcoth, 'the real marvel is that I could see into the future at all. In a way, I can understand the vision of the past. It was clearly composed of physical memories — of all my recent movements; and the background was formed of all the impressions my optic nerves had received during that time. But how could I behold something that hasn't yet happened?'

'There's the mystery, of course,' assented Manners. 'I can think of only one explanation at all intelligible to our finite minds. This is, that all the events which compose the stream of time have already happened, are happening, and will continue to happen forever. In our ordinary state of consciousness, we perceive with the physical senses merely that moment which we call the present. Under the influence of plutonium, you were able to extend the moment of present cognition in both directions, and to behold simultaneously a portion of that which is normally beyond perception. Thus appeared the vision of yourself as a continuous, immobile body, extending through the time-vista.'

Balcoth, who had been standing, now took his leave. 'I must be going,' he said, 'or I'll be late for my appointment.'

'I won't detain you any longer,' said Manners. He appeared to hesitate, and then added: 'I'm still at a loss to comprehend the abrupt cleavage and termination of your prospect of the future. The alley in which it seemed to end was Falman Alley, I suppose — your shortest route to the Belvedere Club. If I were you, Balcoth, I'd take another route, even if it requires a few minutes extra.'

'That sounds rather sinister,' laughed Balcoth. 'Do you think that something may happen to me in Falman Alley?'

‘I hope not — but I can’t guarantee that it won’t.’ Manners’ tone was oddly dry and severe. ‘You’d better do as I suggest.’

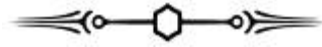
Balcoth felt the touch of a momentary shadow as he left the hotel — a premonition brief and light as the passing of some night-bird on noiseless wings. What could it mean — that gulf of infinite blackness into which the weird frieze of his future had appeared to plunge, like a frozen cataract? Was there a menace of some sort that awaited him in a particular place, at a particular moment?

He had a curious feeling of repetition, of doing something that he had done before, as he followed the street. Reaching the entrance of Falman Alley, he took out his watch. By walking briskly and following the alley, he would reach the Belvedere Club punctually. But if he went on around the next block, he would be a little late. Balcoth knew that his prospective patron, Claud Wishhaven, was almost a martinet in demanding punctuality from himself and from others. So he took the alley.

The place appeared to be entirely deserted, as in his vision. Midway, Balcoth approached the half-seen door — a rear entrance of the huge warehouse — which had formed the termination of the time prospect. The door was his last visual impression, for something descended on his head at that moment, and his consciousness was blotted out by the supervening night he had provisioned. He had been sand-bagged, very quietly and efficiently, by a twenty-first century thug. The blow was fatal; and time, as far as Balcoth was concerned, had come to an end.

The Planet of the Dead

I



BY PROFESSION, FRANCIS Melchior was a dealer in antiques; by avocation he was an astronomer. Thus he contrived to placate, if not to satisfy, two needs of a somewhat complex and unusual temperament. Through his occupation, he gratified in a measure his craving for all things that have been steeped in the mortuary shadows of dead ages, in the dusky amber flames of long-sunken suns; all things that have about them the irresoluble mystery of departed time. And through his avocation, he found a ready path to exotic realms in further space, to the only spheres where his fancy could dwell in freedom and his dreams could know contentment. For Melchior was one of those who are born with an immedicable distaste for all that is present or near at hand; one of those who have drunk too lightly of oblivion and have not wholly forgotten the transcendent glories of other aeons, and the worlds from which they were exiled into human birth; so that their furtive, restless thoughts and dim, unquenchable longings return obscurely toward the vanishing shores of a lost heritage. The earth is too narrow for such, and the compass of mortal time is too brief; and paucity and barrenness are everywhere; and in all places their lot is a never-ending weariness.

With a predisposition ordinarily so fatal to the acquisitive faculties, it was indeed remarkable that Melchior should have prospered at all in his business. His love of ancient things, of rare vases, paintings, furniture, jewels, idols, and statues, made him readier to buy than to sell; and his sales were too often a source of secret heart-ache and regret. But somehow, in

spite of all this, he had managed to attain a degree of financial comfort. By nature, he was something of a solitary, and was, generally looked upon as eccentric. He had never cared to marry; he had made no intimate friends; and he lacked many of the interests, which, in the eyes of the average person, are supposed to characterize a normal human being.

Melchior's passion for antiquities and his devotion to the stars, both dated from his childhood days. Now, in his thirty-first year, with increasing leisure and prosperity, he had turned an upper balcony of his suburban hill-top house into an amateur observatory. Here, with a new and powerful telescope, he studied the summer heavens night after night. He possessed little talent and less inclination for those recondite mathematical calculations which form so large a part of orthodox astronomy; but he had an intuitional grasp of the heavenly immensitudes, a mystic sensitivity toward all that is far off in space. His imagination roamed and adventured among the suns and nebulae; and for him, each tiny gleam of telescopic light appeared to tell its own story and invite him toward its own unique realm of ultramundane fantasy. He was not greatly concerned with the names which astronomers have given to particular stars and constellations; but nevertheless, each of them possessed for him a separate individuality not to be mistaken for that of any other.

In especial, Melchior was drawn by one minute wide-flung constellation south of the Milky Way. It was barely discernible to the naked eye; and even through his telescope, it gave an impression of cosmic solitude and remoteness such as he had never felt in any other orb. It allured him more than the moon-surrounded planets or the first-magnitude stars with their flaming spectra; and he returned to it again and again, forsaking for its lonely point of light the marvelous manifold rings of Saturn and the cloudy zone of Venus and the intricate coils of the nebula of Andromeda.

Musing through many midnights on the attraction the star held for him, Melchior reasoned that in its narrow ray was the whole emanation of a sun and perhaps of a planetary system; that the secret of foreign worlds and even something of their history was implicit in that light, if one could only read the tale. And he longed to understand, and to know the far-woven thread of affinity which drew his attention so perennially to this particular orb. On occasion when he looked, his brain was tantalized by obscure intimations of loveliness and wonder that were still a little beyond the reach of his boldest reveries, of his wildest dreams. And each time, they seemed a trifle nearer, and more attainable than before. And a strange, indeterminate expectancy began to mingle with the eagerness that prompted his evening visits to the balcony.

One midnight, when he was peering through the telescope, he fancied that the star looked a little larger and brighter than usual. Unable to account for this, in a mounting excitement he stared more intently than ever, and was suddenly seized by the unnatural idea that he was peering downward into a vast, vertiginous abyss, rather than toward the zenithal heavens. He felt that the balcony was no longer beneath his feet, but had somehow become inverted; and then, all at once, he was falling from it into the headlong ether, with a million thunders and flames about and behind him. For a brief while, he still seemed to see the star he had been watching, far down in the terrible Cimmerian void; and then he forgot, and could find it no more. There was the sickness of incalculable descent, an ever-swiftening torrent of vertigo not to be borne; and after moments or aeons (he could not tell which) the thunders and flames died out in ultimate darkness, in utmost silence; and he no longer knew that he was falling, and no longer retained any sort of sentiency.

When Melchior returned to consciousness, his first impulse was to clutch the arm of the chair in which he had been sitting beneath the telescope. It was the involuntary movement of one who has fallen in a dream. In a moment he realized the absurdity of this impulse; for he was not sitting in a chair at all; and his surroundings bore no manner of resemblance to the nocturnal balcony on which he had been seized by a strange vertigo, and from which he had seemed to fall and lose himself.

He was standing on a road paven with cyclopean blocks of gray stone — a road that ran interminably before him into the vague, tremendous vistas of an inconceivable world. There were low, funereal, drooping trees along the road, with sad-colored foliage and fruits of a deathly violet; and beyond the trees were range on range of monumental obelisks, of terraces and domes, of colossal multiform piles, that reached away in endless, countless perspectives toward an indistinct horizon. Over all, from an ebon-purple zenith, there fell in rich, unlustrous rays the illumination of a blood-red sun. The forms and proportions of the labyrinthine mass of buildings were unlike anything that has been designed in terrestrial architecture; and, for an instant, Melchior was overwhelmed by their number and magnitude, by their monstrosity and bizarrerie. Then, as he looked once more, they were no longer monstrous, no longer bizarre; and he knew them for what they were, and knew the world upon whose road his feet were set, and the destination he was to seek, and the part he was fated to play. It all came back to him as inevitably as the actual deeds and impulses of life returns to one who has thrown himself obviously for a while into some dramatic role that is foreign to his real personality. The incidents of his existence as Francis Melchior, though he still recalled them, had become obscure and meaningless and grotesque in the reawakening of a state of entity, with all its train of recovered reminiscences, of revived emotions and sensations.

There was no strangeness, only the familiarity of a homecoming, in the fact that he had stepped into another condition of being, with its own environment, with its own past, present, and future, all of which would have been incognizably alien to the amateur astronomer who had peered a few moments before at a tiny star remote in sidereal space.

‘Of course, I am Antaron,’ he mused. ‘Who else could I be? ‘The language of his thoughts was not English, nor any earthly tongue; but he was not surprised by his knowledge of this language; nor was he surprised when he looked down and saw that he was attired in a costume of somber moth-like red, of a style unknown to any human people or epoch. This costume, and certain differences in his physical personality that would have appeared rather odd a little previously, were quite as he expected them to be. He gave them only a cursory glance, as he reviewed in his mind the circumstances of the life he had now resumed.

He, Antaron, a renowned poet of the land of Charmalos, in the elder world that was known to its living peoples by the name of Phandiom, had gone on a brief journey to a neighboring realm. In the course of this journey, a distressing dream had befallen him — the dream of a tedious, unprofitable life as one Francis Melchior, in a quite unpleasant and peculiar sort of planet, lying somewhere on the farther side of the universe. He was unable to recall exactly when and where he had been beset by this dream; and he had no idea how long it had lasted: but at any rate, he was glad to be rid of it, and glad that he was now approaching his native city of Saddoth, where dwelt in her and splendid palace of past aeons the beautiful Thameera, whom he loved. Now, once more, after the obscure clouding of that dream, his mind was full of the wisdom of and his heart was illumed by a thousand memories of Thameera; and was darkened at times by an old anxiety concerning her.

Not without reason had Melchior been fascinated by things antique and by things that are far away. For the world wherein he walked as Antarion was incomputably and the ages of its history were too many for remembrance: and the towering obelisks and piles along the paven road were the high tombs, the proud monuments of its immemorial dead, who had come to outnumber infinitely the living. In more than the pomp of earthly kings, the dead were housed in Phandiom; and their cities loomed insuperably vast, with never-ending streets and prodigious spires, above those lesser abodes wherein the living dwelt. And throughout Phandiom the bygone years were a tangible presence, an air that enveloped all; and the people were steeped in the crepuscular gloom of antiquity; and were wise with all manner of accumulated lore; and were subtle in the practise of strange refinements, of erudite perversities, of all that can shroud with artful opulence and grace and variety the bare uncouth cadaver of life, or hide from mortal vision the leering skull of death. And here, in Saddoth, beyond the domes and terraces and columns of the huge necropolis, a necromantic flower wherein forgotten lilies live again, there bloomed the superb and sorrowful loveliness of Thameera.

III

Melchior, in his consciousness as the poet Antarion, was unable to remember a time when he had not loved Thameera. She had been an ardent passion, an exquisite ideal, a mysterious delight, and an enigmatic grief. He had adored her implicitly through all the selenic changes of her moods in her childish petulance, her passionate or maternal tenderness, her sybilline silence, her merry or macabre whims; and most of all, perhaps, in the obscure sorrows and terrors that overwhelmed her at times.

He and she were the last representatives of noble ancient families, whose untabulated lineage was lost in the crowded cycles of Phandiom. Like all others of their race, they were imbued with the heritage of a complex and decadent culture; and upon their souls the never-lifting shadow of necropolises had fallen from birth. In the life of Phandiom, its atmosphere of elder time, of aeon-developed art, of epicureanism consummate, and already a little moribund, Atarion had found an ample satisfaction for all the instincts of his being. He had lived as an intellectual sybarite; and by virtue of a half-primitive vigor, had not yet fallen upon the spiritual exhaustion and desolation, the dread implacable ennui of racial senescence, that marked so many of his fellows.

Thameera was even more sensitive, more visionary by nature; and hers was the ultimate refinement that is close to an autumnal decay. The influences of the past, which were a source of poetic fruition to Antarion, were turned by her delicate nerves to pain and languor, to horror and oppression. The palace wherein she lived, and the very streets of Saddoth, were filled for her with emanations that welled from the sepulchral reservoirs of death; and the weariness of the innumerable dead was everywhere; and evil or opiate presences came forth from the mausolean vaults, to crush and stifle her with the formless brooding of their wings. Only in the arms of Antarion could she escape them; and only in his kisses could she forget.

Now, after his journey (whose reason he could not quite remember) and after the curious dream in which he had imagined himself as Francis Melchior, Antarion was once more admitted to the presence of Thameera by slaves who were invariably discreet, being tongueless. In the oblique light of beryl and topaz widows, in the mauve and crimson gloom of heavy-folded tapestries, on a floor of marvelous mosaic wrought in ancient cycles,

she came forward languidly to greet him. She was fairer than his memories, and paler than a blossom of the catacombs. She was exquisitely frail, voluptuously proud, with hair of a lunar gold and eyes of nocturnal brown that were pierced by fluctuating stars and circled by the dark pearl of sleepless nights. Beauty and love and sadness exhaled from her like a manifold perfume.

‘I am glad you have come, Antarion, for I have missed you.’ Her voice was as gentle as an air that is from among flowering trees, and melancholy as remembered music.

Antarion would have knelt, but she took him by the hand and led him to a couch beneath the intricately figured curtains. There the lovers sat and looked at each other in affectionate silence.

“Are all things well with you. Thameera?” The query was prompted by the anxious divination of love.

‘No, all things are not well. Why did you go away’? The wings of death and darkness are abroad, they hover more closely than ever; and shades more fearful than those of the past have fallen upon Saddoth. There have been strange perturbations in the aspect of the skies; and our astronomers, after much study and calculation, have announced, the imminent doom of the sun. There remains to us but a single month of light and warmth, and then the sun will go out on the noontide heavens like an extinguished lamp, and eternal night will fall, and the chill of outer space will creep across Phandiom. Our people have gone mad with the predicted horror; and some of them are sunk in despairing apathy, and more have given themselves to frenzied revels and debaucheries... Where have you been, Antarion? In what dream did you lose yourself, that you could forsake me so long?”

Antarion tried to comfort her. ‘Love is still ours,’ he said. ‘And even if the astronomers have read the skies aright, we have a month before us. And

a month is much.'

'Yes, but there are other perils, Antarion. Haspa the king has looked upon me with eyes of senile desire, and woos me assiduously with gifts, with vows, and with threats. It is the sudden, inexorable whim of age and ennui, the caprice of desperation. He is cruel, he is relentless, he is all-powerful.'

'I will take you away,' said Antarion. 'We will flee together, and dwell among the sepulchers and the ruins, where none can find us. And love and ecstasy shall bloom like flowers of scarlet beneath their shadow; and we will meet the everlasting night in each other's arms; and thus we will know the utmost of mortal bliss.'

IV

Beneath the black midnight that hung above them like an imminence of colossal, unremoving wings, the streets of Saddoth were aflame with a million lights of yellow and cinnabar and cobalt and purple. Along the vast avenues, the gorge-deep alleys, and in and out of the stupendous olden palaces, temples, and mansions, there poured the antic revelry, the tumultuous merriment of a night-long masquerade. Everyone was abroad, from Haspa the king and his sleek, sybaritic courtiers, to the lowliest mendicants and pariahs; and a rout of extravagant, unheard-of costumes, a melange of fantasies more various than those of an opium dream, seethed and eddied everywhere. As Thameera had said, the people were mad with the menace of doom foretold by the astronomers; and they sought to forget, in a swift and evermounting delirium of all the senses, their dread of the nearing night. Late in the evening, Antarion left by a postern door the tall and gloomy mansion of his forefathers, and wended his way through the hysteric whirling of the throng toward Thameera's palace. He was garbed in apparel of an antique style, such as had not been worn for a score of

centuries in Phandiom; and his whole head and face were enveloped in a painted mask designed to represent the peculiar physiognomy of a people now extinct. No one could have recognized him; nor could he on his part, have recognized many of the revelers he met, no matter how well-known to him, for most of them were disguised in apparel no less outré, and wore masks that were whimsical or absurd, or loathsome or laughable beyond conception. There were devils and empresses and deities, there were kings and necromancers from all the far, unfathomed ages of Phandiom, there were monsters of mediaeval or prehistoric types, there were things that had never been born or beheld except in the minds of insane decadent artists, seeking to surpass the abnormalities of nature. Even the tomb had been drawn upon for inspiration, and shrouded mummies, wormgnawed cadavers, promenaded among the living. All these masks were the screen of an orgiastic license without precedent or parallel.

All the needful preparations for flight from Saddoth had been made; and Antarion had left minute and careful instructions with his servants regarding certain essential matters. He knew from of old the ruthless, tyrannic temperament of Haspa, knew that the king would brook no opposition to the indulgence of any whim or passion, no matter how momentary. There was no time to be lost in leaving the city with Thameera.

He came by winding devious ways to the garden behind Thameera's palace. There, among the high and spectral lilies of deep or ashen hues, the bowed funereal trees with their fruit of subtle and opiate savor, she awaited him, clad in a costume whose antiquity matched his own, and which was no less impenetrable to recognition. After a brief murmur of greeting, they stole forth together from the garden and joined the oblivious throng. Antarion had feared that Thameera might be watched by the henchmen of Haspa.

But there was no evidence of such watching, no one in sight who seemed to lurk or loiter; only the swift movement of an everchanging crowd, preoccupied with the quest of pleasure. In this crowd, he felt that they were safe.

However, through a scrupulous caution, they allowed themselves to be carried along for a while in the tide of the city's revel, before they sought the long arterial avenue that led to the gates. They joined in the singing of fescennine songs, they returned the bachannalian jests that were flung by passers-by, they drank the wines that were profered them by public urn-bearers, they tarried when the throng tarried, moved when it moved.

Everywhere, there were wildy flaming lights, and the ribaldry of loud voices, and the strident moan or feverous pulsing of musical instruments. There was feasting in the great squares, and the doorways of immemorial houses poured out a flood of illumination, a tumult of laughter and melody, as they offered their hospitality to all who might choose to enter them. And in the huge temples of former aeons; delirious rites were done to the gods who stared forth with unchanging eyes of stone and metal to the hopeless heavens; and the priests and worshippers drugged themselves with terrible opiates, and sought the stupefying ecstasy of abandonment to an hysteria both carnal and devout.

At length Antarion and Thameera, by unobtrusive states, by many windings and turnings, began to approach the gates of Saddoth. For, the first time in their history, these gates were unguarded; for, in the general demoralization, the sentinels had stolen away without fear of detection or reproof, to join the universal orgy. Here, in the outlying quarter, there were few people, and only the scattered flotsam of the revels; and the broad open space between the last houses and the city wall was utterly abandoned. No one saw the lovers when they slipped like evanscent shadows through the

grim yawning of the gates, and followed the gray road into an outer darkness thronged with the dim bulks of mausoleums and monuments.

Here, the stars that had been blinded by the flaring lights of Saddoth were clearly visible in the burnt-out sky. And presently, as the lovers went on, the two small ashea moons of Phandiom arose from behind the necropoles, and flung the despairing languor of their faint beams on the multitudinous domes and minarets of the dead. And beneath the twin moons, that drew their uncertain light from a dying sun, Antarion and Thameera doffed their masks, and looked at each other in a silence of unutterable love and shared the first kiss of their month of ultimate delight.

V

For two days and nights, the lovers had fled from Saddoth. They had hidden by daylight among the mausoleums, they had traveled in darkness and by the doubtful glimmering of the moons, on roads that were little used, since they ran only to age-deserted cities lying in the ulterior tracts of Charmalos, in a land whose very soil had long become exhausted, and was now given over to the stealthy encroachment of the desert. And now they had come to their journey's end; for, mounting a low, treeless ridge, they saw below them the ruinous and forgotten roofs of Urbyzaun, which had lain unpeopled for more than a thousand years; and beyond the roofs, the black unlustrous lake surrounded by hills of bare and wave-corroded rock, that had once been the inlet of a great sea.

Here, in the crumbling palace of the emperor Altanoman, whose high, tumultuous glories were now a failing legend, the slaves of Antarion had preceded them, bringing a supply of food and such comforts and luxuries as they would require in the interim before oblivion. And here they were secure from all pursuit; for Haspa, in the driven fever and goaded ennui of

his last days, had doubtless turned to the satisfying of some other and less difficult caprice, and had already forgotten Thameera.

And now, for the lovers, began the life that was a brief epitome of all possible delight and despair. And strangely enough, Thameera lost the vague fears that had tormented her, the dim sorrows that had obsessed, and was wholly happy in the caresses of Antarion. And, since there was so little time in which to express their love, to share their thoughts, their sentiments, their reveries, there was never enough said or enough done between them: and both were fully content.

But the swift, relentless days went by; and day by day, the red sun that circled above Phandiom was darkened by a tinge of the coming shadow; and chillness stole upon the quiet air; and the still heavens, where never clouds or winds or bird-wings passed, were ominous of doom. And day by day, Antarion and Thameera saw the dusking of the sun from a ruinous terrace above the dead lake; and night by night, they saw the paling of the ghostly moons. And their love became an intolerable sweetness, a thing too deep and dear to be borne by mortal heart or mortal flesh.

Mercifully, they had lost the strict count of time, and knew not the number of days that had passed, and thought that several more dawns and moons and eves of joyance were before them. They were lying together on a couch in the old palace — a marble couch that the slaves had strewn with luxurious fabrics — and were saying over and over some litany of love, when the sun was overtaken at high noon by the doom astronomers had foretold; when a slow twilight filled the palace, heavier than the umbrage wrought by any cloud, and was followed by a sudden wave of overwhelming ebon darkness, and the creeping cold of outer space. The slaves of Antarion moaned in the darkness; and the lovers knew that the end of all was at hand; and they clung to each other in despairing rapture, with

swift, innumerable kisses, and murmured the supreme ecstasy of their tenderness and their desire, till the cold that had fallen from infinitude became a growing agony, and then a merciful numbness, and then an all-encompassing oblivion.

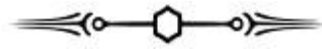
VI

Francis Melchior awoke in his chair beneath the telescope. He shivered, for the air had grown chill; and when he moved, he found that his limbs were strangely stiff, as if he had been exposed to a more rigorous cold than that of the late summer night. The long and curious dream that he had undergone was inexpressibly real to him; and the thoughts, the desires, the fears and despairs of Antarion were still his. Mechanically, rather than through any conscious renewal of the impulses of his earthly self, he fixed his eye to the telescope and looked for the star he had been studying when the premonitory vertigo had seized him. The configuration of the skies had hardly changed, the surrounding constellation was still high in the southeast; but, with a shock that became a veritable stupefaction, he saw that the star itself had disappeared.

Never, though he searched the heavens night after night through the alternation of many seasons, has he been able to find again the little far-off orb that drew him so inexplicably and irresistibly. He bears a double sorrow; and, though he has grown old and gray with the lentor of fruitless years, with the buying and selling of antiques and the study of the stars, Francis Melchior is still a little doubtful as to which is the real dream: his lifetime on earth, or the month in Phandiom below a dying sun, when, as the poet Antarion, he loved the superb and sorrowful beauty of Thameera. And always he is troubled by a dull regret that he should ever have awakened

(if awakening it was) from the death that he died in the palace of Altanoman, with Thameera in his arms and Thameera's kisses on his lips.

The Gorgon



Yet it is less the horror than the grace which turns the gazer's spirit into stone.

— SHELLEY.

I have no reason to expect that anyone will believe my story. If it were another's tale, probably I should not feel inclined to give it credence myself. I tell it herewith, hoping that the mere act of narration, the mere shaping of this macabre day-mare adventure into words will in some slight measure serve to relieve my mind of its execrable burden. There have been times when only a hair's-breadth has intervened betwixt myself and the seething devil-ridden world of madness; for the hideous knowledge, the horror-blackened memories which I have carried so long, were never meant to be borne by the human intellect.

A singular confession, no doubt, for one who has always been a connoisseur of horrors. The deadly, the malign, and baleful things that lurk in the labyrinth of existence have held for me a fascination no less potent than unholy. I have sought them out and looked upon them as one who sees the fatal eyes of the basilisk in a mirror; or as a savant who handles corrosive poisons in his laboratory with mask and gloves. Never did they have for me the least hint of personal menace, since I viewed them with the most impersonal detachment. I have investigated many clues of the spectral, the ghastly, the bizarre, and many mazes of terror from which others would have recoiled with caution or trepidation... But now I could wish that there were one lure which I had not followed, one labyrinth which my curiosity had not explored...

More incredible than all else, perhaps, is the very fact that the thing occurred in Twentieth Century London. The sheer anachronism and fabulosity of the happening has made me doubt the verities of time and space; and ever since then I have been as one adrift on starless seas of confusion, or roaming through unmapped dimensions. Never have I been quite able to re-orient myself, to be altogether sure that I have not gone astray in other centuries, in other lands than those declared by the chronology and geography of the present. I have continual need of modern crowds, of glaring lights, of laughter and clangor and tumult to reassure me; and always I am afraid that such things are only an insubstantial barrier; that behind them lies the realm of ancient horror and immemorial malignity of which I have had this one abominable glimpse. And always it seems to me that the veil will dissolve at any moment, and leave me face to face with an ultimate Fear.

There is no need to detail the events that brought me to London. It should be enough to say that I had endured a great grief, the death of the only woman whom I had loved. I travelled as others have done, to forget, to seek distraction among the novelties of foreign scenes; and I tarried long in London, because its gray and mist-enfolded vastness, its ever-varying throngs, its inexhaustible maze of thoroughfares and lanes and houses, were somehow akin to oblivion itself, and offered more of refuge from my sorrow than brighter cities had given.

I do not know how many weeks or months I lingered in London. Time meant little to me, except as an ordeal to be undergone; and I recked not of its disposal. It is hard to remember what I did or where I went; for all things were blurred in a negligible monotone.

However, my meeting with the old man is clear as any present impression — and perhaps clearer. Among the faint recollections of that

period, it is etched as with some black acid. I can not recall the name of the street on which I saw him; but it was not far from the Strand, and was full of a late afternoon crowd, beneath a heaven of high fog through which the sun had not penetrated for days or weeks.

I was strolling idly along, amid hurrying faces and figures that meant no more to me than the featureless heavens or the uniform shops. My thoughts were idle, empty, immaterial; and in those days (since I had been brought face to face with an all-too-real horror) I had relinquished my search for the darker mysteries of existence. I was without forewarning, without anticipation of anything but the daily drabness of the London streets and people. Then, from that anonymous welter of humanity, the man stood before me with the terrifying suddenness of an apparition; and I could not have sworn from which direction he had come.

He was not unusual in frame or stature, apart from the erectness with which he carried himself notwithstanding his extreme and manifest age. Nor were his garments uncommon, aside from the fact that they too were excessively old, and seemed to exhale an air of greater antiquity than was warranted even by their cut and fabric. It was not these, but the man's visage, which electrified all my drowsy faculties into a fascinated and awe-struck attention. With the mortal pallor of his deeply wrinkled features, like graven ivory, with his long, curling hair and beard that were white as moon-touched vapor, with his eyes that glowed in their hollow sockets like the coals of demon fires in underworld caverns, he would have made a living model for Charon, the boatman who ferries the dead to Hades across the silence of the Styx. He seemed to have stepped from an age and land of classic mythology, into the teeming turmoil of that London street; and the strange impression which he made upon me was in no wise modified by his habiliments. I paid so little attention to these that I could not remember their

details afterward; though I think that their predominant color was a black that had begun to assume the green of time, and suggested the plumage of some sinister bird. My astonishment at the appearance of this singular old man was increased when I saw that no one else in the throng seemed to notice anything unusual or peculiar about him; but that all were hastening on their way with no more, at most, than the off-hand scrutiny which one would give to some aged beggar.

As for me, I had paused in my strolling, petrified with an instant fascination, an immediate terror which I could not analyse or define. The old man, too, had paused; and I saw that we were both a little withdrawn from the current of the crowd, which passed so obviously, intent on its own fears and allurements. Evidently realizing that he had caught my attention, and perceiving the effect which he had upon me, the old man stepped nearer, smiling with a hint of some horrible malevolence, some nameless antique evil. I would have drawn back; but I was bereft of the power of movement. Standing at my very side, and searching me with the gaze of his coal-like orbs, he said to me in a low tone which could not have been overheard by any of the passers-by:

‘I can see that you have a taste for horror. The dark and awful secrets of death, the equally dreadful mysteries of life, allure your interest. If you care to come with me, I will show you something which is the quintessence of all horror. You shall gaze on the head of Medusa with its serpent locks — that very head which was severed by the sword of Perseus.’

I was startled beyond measure by the strange words, uttered in accents which seemed to be heard by the mind rather than the ear. Somehow — unbelievable as this will seem — I have never been quite sure in what language he spoke: it may have been English, or it may have been Greek, which I know perfectly. The words penetrated my understanding without

leaving any definite sense of their actual sound or linguistic nature. And of the voice itself, I know only that it was such as might issue from the very lips of Charon. It was guttural, deep, malign, with an echo of profound gulfs and sunless grottoes.

Of course, my reason strove to dismiss the unaccountable feelings and ideas that had surged upon me. I told myself that it was all imagination; that the man was probably some queer sort of madman, or else was a mere trickster, or a showman who took this method of drumming up custom. But his aspect and his words were of necromantic strangeness; they seemed to promise in a superlative degree the weirdness and bizarrerie which I had sought in former time, and of which, so far, I had found little hint in London. So I answered him quite seriously.

‘Indeed, I should like to see the head of Medusa. But I always understood that it was quite fatal to gaze upon her — that those who beheld her were turned immediately into stone.’

‘That can be avoided,’ returned my interlocutor. ‘I will furnish you with a mirror: and if you are truly careful, and succeed in restraining your curiosity, you can see her even as Perseus did. But you will have to be very circumspect. And she is really so fascinating that few have been able to refrain from looking at her directly. Yes, you must be very cautious. He! he! he!’ His laughter was more horrible even than his smile; and even as he laughed, he began to pluck my sleeve, with a knotted hand that was wholly in keeping with his face, and which might well have gripped through untold ages the dark oars of the Stygian barge.

‘Come with me — it is not far,’ he said. ‘And you will never have a second opportunity. I am the owner of the Head; and I do not show it to many. But I can see that you are one of the few who are fitted to appreciate it.’

It is inexplicable to me that I should have accepted his invitation. The man's personality was highly abhorrent, the feeling he aroused in me was a mixture of irresistible fear and repugnance. In all likelihood he was a lunatic — perhaps a dangerous maniac; or, if not actually mad, was nurturing some ill design, some nefarious purpose to which I would lend myself by accompanying him. It was madness to go with him, it was folly even to listen to his words; and of course his wild claim concerning the ownership of the fabled Gorgon's head was too ridiculous even for the formality of disbelief. If such a thing had ever existed, even in mythic Greece, it was certainly not to be found in present-day London, in the possession of a doubtful-looking old man. The whole affair was more preposterous than a dream ... but nevertheless I went with him. I was under a spell — the spell of unknown mystery, terror, absurdity; and I could no more have refused his offer than a dead man could have refused the conveyance of Charon to the realms of Hades.

'My house is not far away,' he assured me, repetitiously, as we left the crowded street and plunged into a narrow, lightless alley. Perhaps he was right; though I have no precise idea of the distance which we traversed. The lanes and thoroughfares to which he led me were such as I could hardly have believed to exist in that portion of London; and I was hopelessly confused and astray in less than a minute. The houses were foul tenements, obviously of much antiquity, interspersed with a few decaying mansions that were doubtless even older, like remnants of some earlier city. I was struck by the fact that we met no one, apart from rare and furtive stragglers who seemed to avoid us. The air had grown extremely chill, and was fraught with unwonted odors that somehow served to reinforce the sensations of coldness and utter age. Above all was a dead, unchanging sky, with its catafalque of oppressive and super-incumbent grayness. I could not

remember the streets through which we passed, though I was sure that I must have traversed this section of the city before in my wanderings; and a queer perplexity was now mingled with my feeling of dismay and bemusement. It seemed to me that the old man was leading me into a clueless maze of unreality, of deception and dubiety, where nothing was normal or familiar or legitimate.

The air darkened a little, as with the first encroachment of twilight, though it still lacked an hour of sunset-time. In this premonitory dusk, which did not deepen, but became stationary in its degree of shadow, through which all things were oddly distorted and assumed illusory proportions, we reached the house which was our destination.

It was one of the dilapidated mansions, and belonged to a period which I was unable to name despite my extensive architectural knowledge. It stood a little apart from the surrounding tenements; and more than the dimness of the premature twilight seemed to adhere to its dark walls and lampless windows. It impressed me with a sense of vastness; yet I have never been quite sure concerning its exact dimensions: and I can not remember the details of its façade apart from the high and heavy door at the head of a flight of steps which were strangely worn as by the tread of incalculable generations.

The door swung open without sound beneath the gnarled fingers of the old man, who motioned me to precede him. I found myself in a long hall, illumed by silver lamps of an antique type such as I had never before seen in actual use. I think there were ancient tapestries and vases; and also a mosaic floor; but the lamps are the only things which I remember clearly. They burned with white flames that were preternaturally still and cold; and I thought that they had always burned in this manner, unflickering,

unreplenished, throughout a frozen eternity whose days were in no wise different from its nights.

At the end of the hall, we entered a room that was similarly litten, and whose furniture was more than reminiscent of the classic. At the opposite side was an open door, giving on a second chamber, which appeared to be crowded with statuary; for I could see the outlines of still figures that were silhouetted or partly illumined by unseen lamps

‘Be seated,’ said my host, indicating a luxurious couch. ‘I will show you the Head in a few minutes; but haste is unseemly, when one is about to enter the very presence of Medusa.’

I obeyed; but my host remained standing. He was paler and older and more erect than ever in the chill lamplight; and I sensed a sinewy, unnatural vigor, a diabolic vitality, which was terrifyingly incongruous with his extreme age. I shivered with more than the cold of the evening air and the dank mansion. Of course, I still felt that the old man’s invitation was some sort of preposterous foolery or trickery. But the circumstances among which I found myself were unexplainable and uncanny. However, I mustered enough courage to ask a few questions.

‘I am naturally surprised,’ I said, ‘to learn that the Gorgon’s head has survived into modern times. Unless the query is impertinent, will you not tell me how it came into your possession?’

‘He! he!’ laughed the old man, with a loathsome rictus. ‘That is easily answered: I won the Head from Perseus at a game of dice, when he was in his dotage.’ ‘But how is that possible?’ I countered. ‘Perseus lived several thousand years ago.’

‘Yes, according to your notation. But time is not altogether the simple matter which you believe it to be. There are short-cuts between the ages, there are deviations and overlappings among the epochs, of which you have

no idea... Also, I can see that you are surprised to learn that the Head is in London... But London after all is only a name; and there are shiftings, abbreviations, and interchanges of space as well as of time.'

I was amazed by his reasoning, but was forced to admit internally that it did not lack a certain logic.

'I see your point,' I conceded... 'And now, of course, you will show me the Gorgon's head?'

'In a moment. But I must warn you again to be supremely careful; and also, you must be prepared for its exceeding and overwhelming beauty no less than for its horror. The danger lies, as you may well imagine, in the former quality.'

He left the room, and soon returned, carrying in his hand a metal mirror of the same period as the lamps. The face was highly polished, with a reflecting surface, wellnigh equal to that of glass; but the back and handle, with their strange carvings of Laocoön-like figures that writhed in a nameless, frozen agony, were black with the tarnish of elder centuries. It might well have been the very mirror that was employed by Perseus.

The old man placed it in my hands.

'Come,' he said, and turned to the open door through which I had seen the crowded statuary.

'Keep your eyes on the mirror,' he added, 'and do not look beyond it. You will be in grave peril as soon as you enter this door.'

He preceded me, averting his face from the portal, and gazing back across his shoulder with watchful orbs of malignant fire. My own eyes intent on the mirror, I followed.

The room was unexpectedly large; and was lit by many lamps that depended from chains of wrought silver. At first sight, when I had crossed the sill, I thought that it was entirely filled with stone statues, some of them

standing erect in postures of a painful rigor, and others lying on the floor in agonized eternal contortions. Then, moving the mirror a little, I saw that there was a clear space through which one could walk, and a vaster vacant space at the opposite end of the room, surrounding a sort of altar. I could not see the whole of this altar, because the old man was now in my line of mirrored vision. But the figures beside me, at which I now dared to peep without the mirror's intermediation, were enough to absorb my interest for the moment.

They were all life-size and they all offered a most singular medley of historical periods. Yet it would seem that all of them, by the sameness of their dark material, like a black marble, and the uniform realism and verisimilitude of their technique, might well have been sculptured by the same hand. There were boys and bearded men in the chitons of Greece, there were mediaeval monks, and knights in armor, there were soldiers and scholars and great ladies of the Renaissance, of the Restoration; there were people of the Eighteenth, the Nineteenth, the Twentieth centuries. And in every muscle, in every lineament of each, was stamped an incredible suffering, an unspeakable fear. And more and more, as I studied them, a ghastly and hideous conjecture was formulated in my mind.

The old man was at my elbow, leering and peering into my face with a demoniac malice.

‘You are admiring my collection of statuary,’ he said. ‘And I can see that you are impressed by its realism... But perhaps you have already guessed that the statues are identical with their models. These people are the unfortunates who were not content to see Medusa only in a mirror... I warned them ... even as I have warned you... But the temptation was too much for them.’

I could say nothing. My thoughts were full of terror, consternation, stupefaction. Had the old man told me the truth, did he really possess anything so impossible and mythical as the Gorgon's head? Those statues were too life-like, too veridical in all their features, in their poses that preserved a lethal fear, their faces marked with a deadly but undying torment. No human sculptor could have wrought them, could have reproduced the physiognomies and the costumes with a fidelity so consummate and so atrocious.

'Now,' said my host, 'having seen those who were over-powered by the beauty of Medusa, it is time for you to behold the Gorgon herself.' He stepped to one side, eyeing me intently; and I saw in the metal mirror the whole of that strange altar which his body had partially intercepted from my view. It was draped with some funereal black fabric; and lamps were burning on each side with their tall and frozen flames. In the center, on a broad paten of silver or electrum, there stood the veritable Head, even as the ancient myths have depicted it, with vipers crawling and lifting among its matted locks.

How can I delineate or even suggest that which is beyond the normal scope of human sensation or imagining? I saw in the mirror a face of unspeakably radiant pallor — a dead face from which there poured the luminous, blinding glory of celestial corruption, of superhuman bale and suffering. With lidless, intolerable eyes, with lips that were parted in an agonizing smile, she was lovely, she was dreadful, beyond any vision ever vouchsafed to a mystic or an artist, and the light that emanated from her features was the light of worlds that lie too deep or too high for mortal perception. Hers was the dread that turns the marrow into ice, and the anguish that slays like a bolt of lightning.

Long did I gaze in the mirror with the shuddering awe of one who beholds the veiless countenance of a final mystery. I was terrified, appalled — and fascinated to the core of my being; for that which I saw was the ultimate death, the ultimate beauty. I desired, yet I did not dare, to turn and lift my eyes to the reality whose mere reflection was a fatal splendor.

The old man had stepped closer; he was peering into the mirror and watching me with furtive glances, by turns.

‘Is she not beautiful?’ he whispered. ‘Could you not gaze upon her forever?’ And do you not long to behold her without the intermediation of the mirror, which hardly does her justice?’

I shivered at his words, and at something which I sensed behind them.

‘No! no!’ I cried, vehemently. ‘I admit all that you say. But I will not gaze any longer; and I am not mad enough to let myself be turned into a stone image.’

I thrust the mirror into his hands as I spoke and turned to leave, impelled by an access of overmastering fright. I feared the allurements of Medusa: and I loathed that evil ancient with a loathing that was beyond limit or utterance.

The mirror clattered on the floor, as the old man dropped it and sprang upon me with a tigerish agility. He seized me with his knotted hands, and though I had sensed their sinewy vigor, I was not prepared for the demoniacal strength with which he whirled me about and thrust me toward the altar.

‘Look! Look!’ he shrieked, and his voice was that of a fiend who urges the damned to some further pit of perdition.

I had closed my eyes instinctively, but even through my lids I felt the searing radiance. I knew, I believed implicitly the fate which would be mine if I beheld Medusa face to face. I struggled madly but impotently against

the grip that held me; and I concentrated all my will to keep my lids from lighting even by the breadth of an eyelash.

Suddenly my arms were freed, and I felt the diabolic fingers on my brow, groping swiftly to find my eyes. I knew their purpose, and knew also that the old man must have closed his own eyes to avoid the doom he had designed for me. I broke away, I turned, I grappled with him; and we fought insanely, frantically, as he strove to swing me about with one arm and tore at my shut eyelids with his other hand. Young as I am, and muscular, I was no match for him, and I swerved slowly toward the altar, with my head bent back till my neck was almost broken, in a vain effort to avoid the iron fumbling of his fingers. A moment more, and he would have conquered; but the space in which we fought was narrow, and he had now driven me back against a row of the stone figures, some of which were recumbent on the floor. He must have stumbled over one of these, for he fell suddenly with a wild, despairing cry, and released me as he went down. I heard him strike the floor with a crash that was singularly heavy — a crash as of something harder and more massive and more ponderous than a human body.

Still standing with shut eyes, I waited; but there was no sound and no movement from the old man. Bending toward the floor, I ventured to look between half-open lids. He was lying at my feet, beside the figure on which he had tripped; and I needed no second glance to recognize in all his limbs, in all his lineaments, the same rigidity and the same horror which characterized the other statues. Like them, he had been smitten instantaneously into an image of dark stone. In falling, he had seen the very face of Medusa, even as his victims had seen it. And now he would he among them forever.

Somehow, with no backward glance, I fled from the room, I found my way from that horrible mansion, I sought to lose it from sight and memory

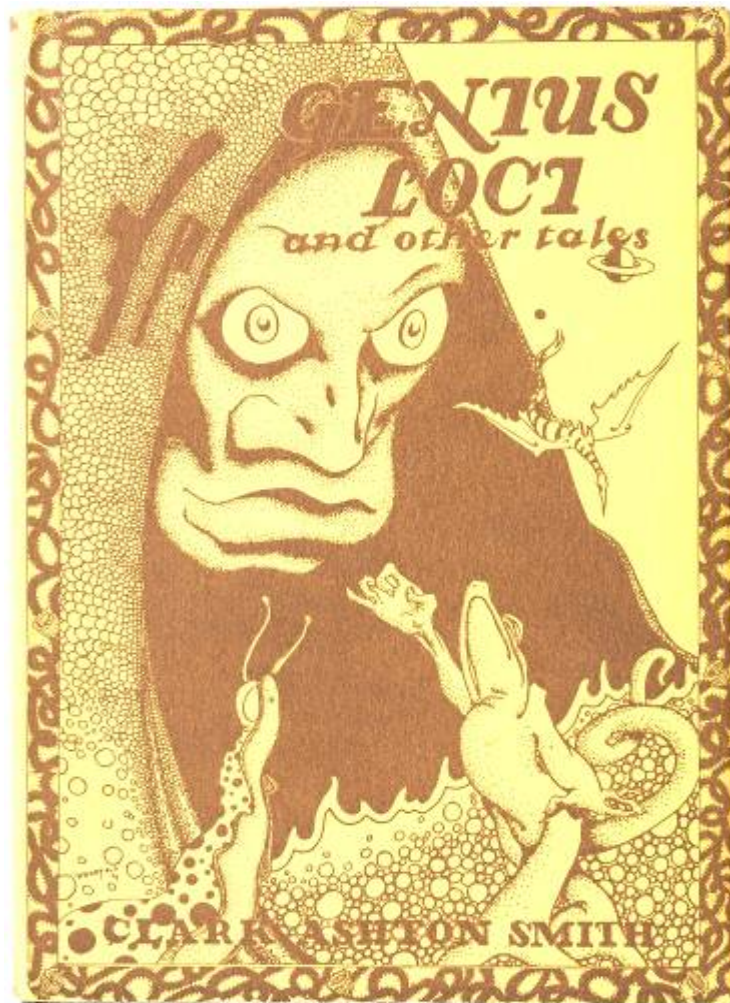
in half-deserted, mysterious alleys that were no legitimate part of London. The chill of ancient death was upon me; it hung in the web of timeless twilight along those irrerecognizable ways, around those innominable houses; and it followed me as I went. But at last, by what miracle I know not, I came to a familiar street, where people thronged in the lamplit dusk, and the air was no longer chill except with a falling fog.

Genius Loci and Other Tales (1948)



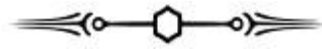
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The first edition

Genius Loci



‘IT IS A very strange place,’ said Amberville, ‘but I scarcely know how to convey the impression it made upon me. It will all sound so simple and ordinary. There is nothing but a sedgy meadow, surrounded on three sides by slopes of yellow pine. A dreary little stream flows in from the open end, to lose itself in a cul-de-sac of cat-tails and boggy ground. The stream, running slowly and more slowly, forms a stagnant pool of some extent from which several sickly-looking alders seem to fling themselves backwards, as if unwilling to approach it. A dead willow leans above the pool, tangling its wan, skeleton-like reflection with the green scum that mottles the water. There are no blackbirds, no kildees, no dragon-flies even, such as one usually finds in a place of that sort. It is all silent and desolate. The spot is evil — it is unholy in a way that I simply can’t describe. I was compelled to make a drawing of it, almost against my will, since anything so outré is hardly in my line. In fact, I made two drawings. I’ll show them to you, if you like.’

Since I had a high opinion of Amberville’s artistic abilities and had long considered him one of the foremost landscape painters of his generation, I was naturally eager to see the drawings. He, however, did not even pause to await my avowal of interest, but began at once to open his portfolio. His facial expression, the very movements of his hands, were somehow eloquent of a strange mixture of compulsion and repugnance as he brought out and displayed the two water-colour sketches he had mentioned.

I could not recognize the scene depicted from either of them, Plainly it was one that I had missed in my desultory rambling about the foot-hill

environs of the tiny hamlet of Bowman, where, two years before, I had purchased an uncultivated ranch and had retired for the privacy so essential to prolonged literary effort. Francis Amberville, in the one fortnight of his visit, through his flair for the pictorial potentialities of landscape, had doubtless grown more familiar with the neighbourhood than I. It had been his habit to roam about in the forenoon, armed with sketching-materials; and in this way he had already found the theme of more than one lovely painting. The arrangement was mutually convenient, since I, in his absence was wont to apply myself assiduously to an antique Remington typewriter.

I examined the drawings attentively. Both, though of hurried execution, were highly meritorious, and showed the characteristic grace and vigour of Amberville's style. And yet, even at first glance, I found a quality that was more alien to the spirit of his work. The elements of the scene were those he had described. In one picture, the pool was half hidden by a fringe of mace-weeds, and the dead willow was leaning across it at a prone, despondent angle, as if mysteriously arrested in its fall towards the stagnant waters. Beyond, the alders seemed to strain away from the pool, exposing their knotted roots as if in eternal effort. In the other drawing, the pool formed the main portion of the foreground, with the skeleton tree looming drearily at one side. At the water's farther end, the cat-tails seemed to wave and whisper among themselves in a dying wind; and the steeply barring slope of pine at the meadow's terminus was indicated as a wall of gloomy green that closed in the picture, leaving only a pale of autumnal sky at the top.

All this, as the painter had said, was ordinary enough. But I was impressed immediately by a profound horror that lurked in these simple elements and was expressed by them as if by the balefully contorted features of some demoniac face. In both drawings, this sinister character was equally evident, as if the same face had been shown in profile and front

view. I could not trace the separate details that composed the impressions; but ever, as I looked, the abomination of a strange evil, a spirit of despair, malignity, desolation, leered from the drawing more openly and hatefully. The spot seemed to wear a macabre and Satanic grimace. One felt that it might speak aloud, might utter the imprecations of some gigantic devil, or the raucous derision of a thousand birds of ill omen. The evil conveyed was something wholly outside of humanity — more ancient than man. Somehow — fantastic as this will seem — the meadow had the air of a vampire, grown old and hideous with unutterable infamies. Subtly, indefinably, it thirsted for other things than the sluggish trickle of water by which it was fed.

‘Where is the place?’ I asked, after a minute or two of silent inspection. It was incredible that anything of the sort could really exist — and equally incredible that a nature so robust as Amberville should have been sensitive to its quality.

‘It’s in the bottom of that abandoned ranch, a mile or less down the little road towards Bear River,’ he replied. ‘You must know it. There’s a small orchard about the house, on the upper hillside; but the lower portion, ending in that meadow, is all wild land.’

I began to visualize the vicinity in question. ‘Guess it must be the old Chapman place,’ I decided, ‘No other ranch along that road would answer your specifications.’

‘Well, whoever it belongs to, that meadow is the most horrible spot I have ever encountered. I’ve known other landscapes that had something wrong with them, but never anything like this.’

‘Maybe it’s haunted,’ I said, half in jest. ‘From your description, it must be the very meadow where old Chapman was found dead one morning by his youngest daughter. It happened a few months after I moved here. He

was supposed to have died of heart failure. His body was quite cold, and he had probably been lying there all night, since the family had missed him at suppertime. I don't remember him very clearly, but I remember that he had a reputation for eccentricity. For some time before his death, people thought he was going mad. I forget the details, Anyway, his wife and children left, not long after he died, and no one has occupied the house or cultivated the orchard since. It was a commonplace rural tragedy.'

'I'm not much of a believer in spooks,' observed Amberville, who seemed to have taken my suggestion of haunting in a literal sense. 'Whatever the influence is, it's hardly of human origin, Come to think of it, though, I received a very silly impression once or twice—' the idea that some one was watching me while I, did those drawings. Queer — I had almost forgotten that, till you brought up the possibility of haunting. I seemed to see him out of the tail of my eye, just beyond the radius that I was putting into the picture: a dilapidated old scoundrel with dirty grey whiskers, and an evil scowl. It's odd, too, that I should have gotten such a definite conception of him, without ever seeing him squarely. I thought it was a tramp who had strayed into the meadow bottom. But when I turned to give him a level glance, he simply wasn't there. It was as if he melted into the miry ground, the cat-tails, the sedges.'

'That isn't a bad description of Chapman,' I said. 'I remember his whiskers — they were almost white, except for the tobacco juice. A battered antique, if there ever was one — and very unamiable, too. He had a poisonous glance towards the end, which no doubt helped along the legend of his insanity. Some of the tales about him come back to me now. People said that he neglected the care of his orchard more and more. Visitors used to find him in that lower meadow, standing idly about and staring vacantly at the trees and water. Probably that was one reason they thought he was

losing his mind. But I'm sure I never heard that there was anything unusual or queer about the meadow, either at the time of Chapman's death, or since. It's a lonely spot, and I don't imagine that any one ever goes there now.'

'I stumbled on it quite by accident,' said Amberville. 'The place isn't visible from the road, on account of the thick pines... But there's another odd thing. I went out this morning with a strong and clear intuition that I might find something of uncommon interest. I made a bee-line for the meadow, so to speak; and I'll have to admit that the intuition justified itself. The place repels me — but it fascinates me, too. I've simply got to solve the mystery, if it has a solution,' he added, with a slightly defensive air. 'I'm going back early tomorrow, with my oils, to start a real painting of it.'

I was surprised, knowing that predilection of Amberville for scenic brilliance and gaiety which had caused him to be likened to Sorolla. 'The painting will be a novelty for you,' I commented. 'I'll have to come and take a look at the place myself, before long. It should really be more in my line than yours. There ought to be a weird story in it somewhere, if it lives up to your drawings and description.'

Several days passed. I was deeply preoccupied, at the time with the toilsome and intricate problems offered by the concluding chapters of a new novel; and I put off my proposed visit to the meadow discovered by Amberville. My friend, on his part, was evidently engrossed by his new theme. He sallied forth each morning with his easel and oil-colours, and returned later each day, forgetful of the luncheon-hour that had formerly brought him back from such expeditions. On the third day, he did not reappear till sunset. Contrary to his custom, he did not show me what he had done, and his answers to my queries regarding the progress of the picture were somewhat vague and evasive. For some reason, he was unwilling to talk about it. Also, he was apparently loath to discuss the

meadow itself, and in answer to direct questions, merely reiterated in an absent and perfunctory manner the account he had given me following his discovery of the place. In some mysterious way that I could not define, his attitude seemed to have changed.

There were other changes, too. He seemed to have lost his usual bitterness. Often I caught him frowning intently, and surprised the lurking of some equivocal shadow in his frank eyes

There was a moodiness, a morbidity, which, as far as our five years' friendship enabled me to observe, was a new aspect of his temperament. Perhaps, if I had not been so preoccupied with my own difficulties, I might have wondered more as to the causation of his gloom, which I attributed readily enough at first to some technical dilemma that was baffling him. He was less and less the Amberville that I knew; and on the fourth day, when he came back at twilight, I perceived an actual surliness that was quite foreign to his nature.

'What's wrong?' I ventured to inquire. 'Have you struck a snag? Or is old Chapman's meadow getting on your nerves with its ghostly influences?'

He seemed, for once, to make an effort to throw off his gloom, his taciturnity and ill humour.

'It's the infernal mystery of the thing,' he declared, 'I've simply got to solve it, in one way or another. The place has an entity of its own — an indwelling personality. It's there, like the soul in a human body, but I can't pin it down or touch it. You know that I'm not superstitious — but, on the other hand, I'm not a bigoted materialist, either; and I've run across some odd phenomena in my time. That meadow, perhaps, is inhabited by what the ancients called a *Genius Loci*. More than once, before this, I have suspected that such things might exist — might reside, inherent, in some particular spot. But this is the first time that I've had reason to suspect anything of an

actively malignant or inimical nature. The other influences, whose presence I have felt, were benign in some large, vague, impersonal way — or were else wholly indifferent to human welfare — perhaps oblivious of human existence. This thing, however, is hatefully aware and watchful: I feel that the meadow itself — or the force embodied in the meadow — is scrutinizing me all the time. The place has the air of a thirsty vampire, waiting to drink me in somehow, if it can. It is a cul-de-sac of everything evil, in which an unwary soul might well be caught and absorbed. But I tell you, Murray, I can't keep away from it.'

'It looks as if the place were getting you,' I said, thoroughly astonished by his extraordinary declaration, and by the air of fearful and morbid conviction with which he uttered it.

Apparently he had not heard me, for he made no reply to my observation. 'There's another angle,' he went on, with a feverish intensity in his voice. 'You remember my impression of an old man lurking in the background and watching me, on my first visit. Well, I have seen him again, many times, out of the corner of my eye; and during the last two days, he has appeared more directly, though in a queer, partial way. Sometimes, when I am studying the dead willow very intently, I see his scowling filthy-bearded face as a part of the hole. Then, again, it will float among the leafless twigs, as if it had been caught there. Sometimes a knotty hand, a tattered coat-sleeve, will emerge through the mantling in the pool, as if a drowned body were rising to the surface. Then, a moment later — or simultaneously — there will be something of him among the alders or the cat-tails. These apparitions are always brief, and when I try to scrutinize them closely, they melt like films of vapour into the surrounding scene. But the old scoundrel, whoever or whatever he may be, is a sort of fixture. He is

no less vile than everything else about the place, though I feel that he isn't the main element of the vileness.'

'Good Lord!' I exclaimed. 'You certainly have been seeing things. If you don't mind, I'll come down and join you for a while, tomorrow afternoon. The mystery begins to inveigle me.'

'Of course I don't mind, Come ahead.' His manner, all at once, for no tangible reason, had resumed the unnatural taciturnity of the past four days. He gave me a furtive look that was sullen and almost unfriendly. It was as if an obscure barrier, temporarily laid aside, had again risen between us. The shadows of his strange mood returned upon him visibly; and my efforts to continue the conversation were rewarded only by half-surlly, half-absent monosyllables. Feeling an aroused concern, rather than any offence, I began to note, for the first time, the unwonted pallor of his face, and the bright, febrile lustre of his eyes. He looked vaguely unwell, I thought, as if something of his exuberant vitality had gone out of him, and had left in its place an alien energy of doubtful and less healthy nature. Tacitly, I gave up any attempt to bring him back from the secretive twilight into which he had withdrawn. For the rest of the evening, I pretended to read a novel, while Amberville maintained his singular abstraction. Somewhat inconclusively, I puzzled over the matter till bedtime. I made up my mind, however, that I would visit Chapman's meadow. I did not believe in the supernatural, but it seemed apparent that the place was exerting a deleterious influence upon Amberville.

The next morning, when I arose, my Chinese servant informed me that the painter had already breakfasted and had gone out with his easel and colours. This further proof of his obsession troubled me; but I applied myself rigorously to a forenoon of writing.

Immediately after luncheon, I drove down the highway, followed the narrow dirt road that branched off towards Bear River, and left my car on the pine-thick hill above the old Chapman place. Though I had never visited the meadow, I had a pretty clear idea of its location. Disregarding the grassy, half-obliterated road into the upper portion of the property, I struck down through the woods into the little blind valley, seeing more than once, on the opposite slope, the dying orchard of pear and apple trees, and the tumbledown shanty that had belonged to the Chapmans.

It was a warm October day; and the serene solitude of the forest, the autumnal softness of light and air, made the idea of anything malign or sinister seem impossible. When I came to the meadow-bottom, I was ready to laugh at Amberville's notions; and the place itself, at first sight, merely impressed me as being rather dreary and dismal. The features of the scene were those that he had described so clearly, but I could not find the open evil that had leered from the pool, the willow, the alders and the cat-tails in his drawings.

Amberville, with his back towards me, was seated on a folding stool before his easel, which he had placed among the plots of dark green wire-grass in the open ground above the pool. He did not seem to be working, however, but was staring intently at the scene beyond him, while a loaded brush drooped idly in his fingers. The sedges deadened my footfalls, and he did not hear me as I drew near.

With much curiosity, I peered over his shoulder at the large canvas on which he had been engaged. As far as I could tell, the picture had already been carried to a consummate degree of technical perfection. It was an almost photographic rendering of the scummy water, the whitish skeleton of the leaning willow, the unhealthy, half-disrooted alders, and the cluster of nodding mace-reeds. But in it I found the macabre and demoniac spirit of

the sketches: the meadow seemed to wait and watch like an evilly distorted face. It was a deadfall of malignity and despair, lying from the autumn world around it; a plague-spot of nature, forever accursed and alone.

Again I looked at the landscape itself — and saw that the spot was indeed as Amberville had depicted it. It wore the grimace of a mad vampire, hateful and alert! At the same time, I became disagreeably conscious of the unnatural silence. There were no birds, no insects, as the painter had said; and it seemed that only spent and dying winds could ever enter that depressed valley-bottom. The thin stream that lost itself in the boggy ground was like a soul that went down to perdition. It was part of the mystery, too; for I could not remember any stream on the lower side of the barring hill that would indicate a subterranean outlet.

Amberville's intentness, and the very posture of his head and shoulders, were like those of a man who has been mesmerized. I was about to make my presence known to him; but at that instant there came to me the apperception that we were not alone in the meadow. Just beyond the focus of my vision, a figure seemed to stand in a furtive attitude, as if watching us both. I whirled about and there was no one. Then I heard a startled cry from Amberville and turned to find him staring at me. His features wore a look of terror and surprise, which had not wholly erased a hypnotic absorption.

‘My God!’ he said, ‘I thought you were the old man!’

I can not be sure whether anything more was said by either of us. I have, however, the impression of a blank silence. After his single exclamation of surprise, Amberville seemed to retreat into an impenetrable abstraction, as if he were no longer conscious of my presence; as if, having identified me, he had forgotten me at once. On my part, I felt a weird and overpowering constraint. That infamous, eerie scene depressed me beyond measure. It seemed that the boggy bottom was trying to drag me down in some

intangible way. The boughs of the sick alders beckoned. The pool, over which the bony willow presided like an arboreal death, was wooing me foully with its stagnant waters.

Moreover, apart from the ominous atmosphere of the scene itself, I was painfully aware of a further change in Amberville — a change that was an actual alienation. His recent mood, whatever it was, had strengthened upon him enormously: he had gone deeper into its morbid twilight, and was lost to the blithe and sanguine personality I had known. It was as if an incipient madness had seized him; and the possibility of this terrified me.

In a slow, somnambulistic manner, without giving me a second glance, he began to work at his painting, and I watched him for a while, hardly knowing what to do or say. For long intervals he would stay and peer with dreamy intentness at some feature of the landscape. I conceived the bizarre idea of a growing kinship, a mysterious rapport between Amberville and the meadow. In some intangible way, it seemed as if the place had taken something from his very soul — and had given something of itself in exchange. He wore the air of one who participates in some unholy secret, who has become the acolyte of an unhuman knowledge. In a flash of horrible definitude, I saw the place as an actual vampire, and Amberville as its willing victim.

How long I remained there, I can not say. Finally I stepped over to him and shook him roughly by the shoulder.

‘You’re working too hard,’ I said. ‘Take my advice, and lay off for a day or two.’

He turned to me with the dazed look of one who is lost in some narcotic dream. This, very slowly, gave place to a sullen, evil anger.

‘Oh, go to hell!’ he snarled. ‘Can’t you see that I’m busy?’

I left him then, for there seemed nothing else to do under the circumstances. The mad and spectral nature of the whole affair was enough to make me doubt my own reason. My impressions of the meadow — and of Amberville — were tainted with an insidious horror such as I had ever before felt in any moment of waking life and normal consciousness.

At the bottom of the slope of yellow pine, I turned back with repugnant curiosity for a parting glance. The painter had not moved, he was still confronting the malignant scene like a charmed bird that faces a lethal serpent. Whether or not the impression was a double optic image, I have never been sure: but at that instant I seemed to discern a faint, unholy aura, neither light nor mist, that flowed and wavered about the meadow, preserving the outlines of the willow, the alders, the weeds, the pool. Stealthily it appeared to lengthen, reaching towards Amberville like ghostly arms. The whole image was extremely tenuous, and may well have been an illusion; but it sent me shuddering into the shelter of the tall, benignant pines.

The remainder of that day, and, the evening that followed, were tinged with the shadowy horror I had found in Chapman's meadow. I believe that I spent most of the time in arguing vainly with myself, in trying to convince the rational part of my mind that all I had seen and felt was utterly preposterous. I could arrive at no conclusion, other than a conviction that Amberville's mental health was endangered by the damnable thing, whatever it was, that inhered in the meadow. The malign personality of the place, the impalpable terror, mystery and lure, were like webs that had been woven upon my brain, and which I could not dissipate by any amount of conscious effort.

I made two resolves, however: one was, that I should write immediately to Amberville's fiancé, Miss Avis Olcott, and invite her to visit me as a

fellow-guest of the artist during the remainder of his stay at Bowman. Her influence, I thought, might help to counteract whatever was affecting him so perniciously. Since I knew her fairly well, the invitation would not seem out of the way. I decided to say nothing about it to Amberville: the element of surprise, I hoped, would be especially beneficial.

My second resolve was, that I should not again visit the meadow myself, if I could avoid it. Indirectly — for I knew the folly of trying to combat a mental obsession openly — I should also try to discourage the painter's interest in the place, and divert his attention to other themes. Trips and entertainments, too, could be devised, at the minor cost of delaying my own work.

The smoky autumn twilight overtook me in such meditations as these; but Amberville did not return. Horrible premonitions, without coherent shape or name, began to torment me as I waited for him. The night darkened; and dinner grew cold on the table. At last, about nine o'clock, when I was nerving myself to go out and hunt for him, he came in hurriedly. He was pale, dishevelled, out of breath; and his eyes held a painful glare, as if everything had frightened him beyond endurance.

He did not apologize for his lateness; nor did he refer to my own visit to the meadow-bottom. Apparently he had forgotten the whole episode — had forgotten his rudeness to me.

'I'm through!' he cried. 'I'll never go back again — never take another chance. That place is more hellish at night than in the daytime. I can't tell you what I've seen and felt — I must forget it, if I can. There's an emanation — something that comes out openly in the absence of the sun, but is latent by day. It lures me, it tempted me to remain this evening — and it nearly got me... God! I didn't believe that such things were possible — that abhorrent compound of—' He broke off, and did not finish the

sentence. His eyes dilated, as if with the memory of something too awful to be described. At that moment, I recalled the poisonously haunted eyes of old Chapman whom I had sometimes met about the hamlet. He had not interested me particularly, since I had deemed him a common type of rural character, with a tendency to some obscure and unpleasant aberration. Now, when I saw the same look in the eyes of a sensitive artist, I began to wonder, with a shivering speculation, whether Chapman too had been aware of the weird evil that dwelt in his meadow. Perhaps, in some way that was beyond human comprehension, he had been its victim... He had died there; and his death had not seemed at all mysterious. But perhaps, in the light of all that Amberville and I had perceived, there was more in the matter than any one had suspected.

‘Tell me what you saw,’ I ventured to suggest. At the question, a veil seemed to fall between us, impalpable but terrific. He shook his head morosely and made no reply. The human terror, which perhaps had driven him back towards his normal self, and had made him almost communicative for the nonce, fell away from Amberville. A shadow that was darker than fear, an impenetrable alien umbrage, again submerged him. I felt a sudden chill, of the spirit rather than the flesh; and once more there came to me the outré thought of his growing kinship with the ghoulish meadow. Beside me, in the lamplit room, behind the mask of his humanity, a thing that was not wholly human seemed to sit and wait.

Of the nightmarish days that followed, I shall offer only a summary. It would be impossible to convey the eventless, fantasmal horror in which we dwelt and moved.

I wrote immediately to Miss Olcott, pressing her to pay me a visit during Amberville’s stay, and, in order to insure acceptance, I hinted obscurely at my concern for his health and my need of her coadjutation. In the

meanwhile, waiting her answer, I tried to divert the artist by suggesting trips to sundry points of scenic interest in the neighbourhood. These suggestions he declined, with an aloof curtness, an air that was stony and cryptic rather than deliberately rude. Virtually, he ignored my existence, and made it more than plain that he wished me to have him to his own devices. This, in despair, I finally decided to do, pending the arrival of Miss Olcott. He went out early each morning, as usual, with his paints and easel, and returned about sunset or a little later. He did not tell me where he had been; and I refrained from asking.

Miss Olcott came on the third day following my letter, in the afternoon. She was young, lissome, ultra-feminine, and was altogether devoted to Amberville. In fact, I think she was a little in awe of him. I told her as much as I dared, and warned her of the morbid change in her fiancé, which I attributed to nervousness and overwork. I simply could not bring myself to mention Chapman's meadow and its baleful influence: the whole thing was too unbelievable, too fantasmagoric, to be offered as an explanation to a modern girl. When I saw the somewhat helpless alarm and bewilderment with which she listened to my story, I began to wish that she were of a more wilful and determined type, and were less submissive towards Amberville than I surmised her to be. A stronger woman might have saved him; but even then I began to doubt whether Avis could do anything to combat the imponderable evil that was engulfing him.

A heavy crescent moon was hanging like a blood-dipped horn in the twilight, when he returned. To my immense relief, the presence of Avis appeared to have a highly salutary effect. The very moment that he saw her, Amberville came out of the singular eclipse that had claimed him, as I feared, beyond redemption, and was almost his former affable self. Perhaps it was all makebelieve, for an ulterior purpose; but this, at the time, I could

not suspect. I began to congratulate myself on having applied a sovereign remedy. The girl, on her part, was plainly relieved; though I saw her eyeing him in a slightly hurt and puzzled way, when he sometimes fell for a short interval into moody abstraction, as if he had temporarily forgotten her. On the whole, however, there was a transformation that appeared no less than magical, in view of his recent gloom and remoteness. After a decent interim, I left the pair together, and retired.

I rose very late the next morning, having overslept. Avis and Amberville I learned, had gone out together, carrying a lunch which my Chinese cook had provided. Plainly he was taking her along on one of his artistic expeditions; and I augured well for his recovery from this. Somehow, it never occurred to me that he had taken her to Chapman's meadow. The tenuous, malignant shadow of the whole affair had begun to lift from my mind; I rejoiced in a lightened sense of responsibility; and, for the first time in a week, was able to concentrate clearly on the ending of my novel.

The two returned at dusk, and I saw immediately that I had been mistaken on more points than one. Amberville had again retired into a sinister, saturnine reserve. The girl, beside his looming height and massive shoulders, looked very small, forlorn and pitifully bewildered and frightened. It was as if she had encountered something altogether beyond her comprehension something with which she was humanly powerless to cope.

Very little was said by either of them. They did not tell me where they had been; but, for that matter, it was unnecessary to inquire. Amberville's taciturnity, as usual, seemed due to an absorption in some dark mood or sullen reverie. But Avis gave me the impression of a dual constraint — as if, apart from some enthralling terror, she had been forbidden to speak of the day's events and experiences. I knew that they had gone to that accursed

meadow; but I was far from sure whether Avis had been personally conscious of the weird and baneful entity of the place, or had merely been frightened by the unwholesome change in her lover beneath its influence. In either case, it was obvious that she was wholly subservient to him, I began to damn myself for a fool in having invited her to Bowman — though the true bitterness of my regret was still to come.

A week went by, with the same daily excursions of the painter and his fiancé — the same baffling, sinister estrangement and secrecy in Amberville — the same terror, helplessness, constraint and submissiveness in the girl. How it would all end, I could not imagine; but I feared, from the ominous alteration of his character, that Amberville was heading for some form of mental alienation, if nothing worse. My offers of entertainment and scenic journeys were rejected by the pair; and several blunt efforts to question Avis were met by a wall of almost hostile evasion which convinced me that Amberville had enjoined her to secrecy — and had perhaps, in some sleightful manner, misrepresented my own attitude towards him.

‘You don’t understand him,’ she said, repeatedly. ‘He is very temperamental.’

The whole affair was a maddening mystery, but it seemed more and more that the girl herself was being drawn, either directly or indirectly, into the same fantasmal web that had enmeshed the artist.

I surmised that Amberville had done several new pictures of the meadow; but he did not show them to me, nor even mention them. My own impressions of the place, as time went on, assumed an unaccountable vividness that was almost hallucinatory. The incredible idea of some inherent force or personality, malevolent and even vampirish, became an unavowed conviction against my will. The place haunted me like a fantasm, horrible but seductive. I felt an impelling morbid curiosity, an unwholesome

desire to visit it again, and fathom, if possible, its enigma. Often I thought of Amberville's notion about a Genius Loci that dwelt in the meadow, and the hints of a human apparition that was somehow associated with the spot. Also, I wondered what it was that the artist had seen on the one occasion when he had lingered in the meadow after nightfall, and had returned to my house in driven terror. It seemed that he had not ventured to repeat the experiment, in spite of his obvious subjection to the unknown lure.

The end came, abruptly and without premonition. Business had taken me to the county seat, one afternoon, and I did not return till late in the evening. A full moon was high above the pine-dark hills. I expected to find Avis and the painter in my drawing-room; but they were not there. Li Sing, my factotum, told me that they had returned at dinnertime. An hour later, Amberville had gone out quietly while the girl was in her room. Coming down a few minutes later, Avis had shown excessive perturbation when she found him absent, and had also left the house, as if to follow him, without telling Li Sing where she was going or when she might return. All this had occurred three hours previously; and neither of the pair had yet reappeared.

A black and subtly chilling intuition of evil seized me as I listened to Li Sing's account. All too well I surmised that Amberville had yielded to the temptation of a second nocturnal visit to that unholy meadow. An occult attraction, somehow, had overcome the horror of his first experience, whatever it had been. Avis, knowing where he was, and perhaps fearful of his sanity — or safety — had gone out to find him. More and more, I felt an imperative conviction of some peril that threatened them both — some hideous and innominate thing to whose power, perhaps, they had already yielded.

Whatever my previous folly and remissness in the matter, I did not delay now. A few minutes of driving at precipitate speed through the mellow

moonlight brought me to the piny edge of the Chapman property. There, as on my former visit, I left the car, and plunged headlong through the shadowy forest, Far down, in the hollow, as I went, I heard a single scream, shrill with terror, and abruptly terminated. I felt sure that the voice was that of Avis; but I did not hear it again.

Running desperately, I emerged in the meadow-bottom, Neither Avis nor Amberville was in sight; and it seemed to me, in my hasty scrutiny, that the place was full of mysteriously coiling and moving vapours that permitted only a partial view of the dead willow and the other vegetation. I ran on towards the scummy pool, and nearing it, was arrested by a sudden and twofold horror.

Avis and Amberville were floating together in the shallow pool, with their bodies half hidden by the mantling masses of algae. The girl was clasped tightly in the painter's arms, as if he had carried her with him, against her will, to that noisome death. Her face was covered by the evil, greenish scum; and I could not see the face of Amberville, which was averted against her shoulder. It seemed that there had been a struggle; but both were quiet now, and had yielded supinely to their doom.

It was not this spectacle alone, however, that drove me in mad and shuddering flight from the meadow, without making even the most tentative attempt to retrieve the drowned bodies. The true horror lay in the thing, which, from a little distance, I had taken for the coils of a slowly moving and rising mist. It was not vapour, nor anything else that could conceivably exist — that malign, luminous, pallid emanation that enfolded the entire scene before me like a restless and hungrily wavering extension of its outlines — a phantom projection of the pale and deathlike willow, the dying alders, the reeds, the stagnant pool and its suicidal victims. The landscape was visible through it, as through a film; but it seemed to curdle and thicken

gradually in places, with some unholy, terrifying activity. Out of these curdlings, as if disgorged by the ambient exhalation, I saw the emergence of three human faces that partook of the same nebulous matter, neither mist nor plasma. One of these faces seemed to detach itself from the bole of the ghostly willow; the second and third swirled upwards from the seething of the phantom pool, with their bodies trailing formlessly among the tenuous boughs. The faces were those of old Chapman, of Francis Amberville, and Avis Olcott.

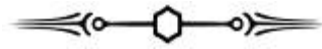
Behind this eerie, wraith-like projection of itself, the actual landscape leered with the same infernal and vampirish air which it had worn by day. But it seemed now that the place was no longer still — that it seethed with a malignant secret life — that it reached out towards me with its scummy waters, with the bony fingers of its trees, with the spectral faces it had spewed forth from its lethal deadfall.

Even terror was frozen within me for a moment. I stood watching, while the pale, unhallowed exhalation rose higher above the meadow. The three human faces, through a further agitation of the curdling mass, began to approach each other. Slowly, inexpressibly, they merged in one, becoming an androgynous face, neither young nor old, that melted finally into the lengthening phantom boughs of the willow — the hands of the arboreal death, that were reaching out to enfold me. Then, unable to bear the spectacle any longer, I started to run.

There is little more that need be told, for nothing that I could add to this narrative would lessen the abominable mystery of it all in any degree. The meadow — or the thing that dwells in the meadow — has already claimed three victims... and I sometimes wonder if it will have a fourth. I alone, it would seem, among the living, have guessed the secret of Chapman's death, and the death of Avis and Amberville; and no one else, apparently, has felt

the malign genius of the meadow. I have not returned there, since the morning when the bodies of the artist and his fiancée were removed from the pool... nor have I summoned up the resolution to destroy or otherwise dispose of the four oil paintings and two watercolor-drawings of the spot that were made by Amberville. Perhaps... in spite of all that deters me... I shall visit it again.

The Ninth Skeleton



IT WAS BENEATH the immaculate blue of a morning in April that I set out to keep my appointment with Guenevere. We had agreed to meet on Boulder Ridge, at a spot well known to both of us, a small and circular field surrounded with pines and full of large stones, midway between her parents' home at Newcastle and my cabin on the north-eastern extremity of the Ridge, near Auburn.

Guenevere is my fiancée. It must be explained that at the time of which I write, there was a certain amount of opposition on the part of her parents to the engagement — an opposition since happily withdrawn. In fact, they had gone so far as to forbid me to call, and Guenevere and I could see each other only by stealth, and infrequently.

The Ridge is a long and rambling moraine, heavily strewn in places with boulders, as its name implies, and with many outcroppings of black volcanic stone. Fruit-ranches cling to some of its slopes, but scarcely any of the top is under cultivation, and much of the soil, indeed, is too thin and stony, to be arable. With its twisted pines, often as fantastic in form as the cypresses of the California coast, and its gnarled and stunted oaks, the landscape has a wild and quaint beauty, with more than a hint of the Japanesque in places.

It is perhaps two miles from my cabin to the place where I was to meet Guenevere. Since I was born in the very shadow of Boulder Ridge, and have lived upon or near it for most of my thirty-odd years, I am familiar with every rod of its lovely and rugged extent, and, previous to that April morning, would scarcely have refrained from laughing if anyone had told

me I could possibly lose my way... Since then — well, I assure you, I should not feel inclined to laugh...

Truly, it was a morning made for the trysts of lovers. Wild bees were humming busily in the patches of clover and in the ceanothus bushes with their great masses of white flowers, whose strange and heavy perfume intoxicated the air. Most of the spring blossoms were abroad: cyclamen, yellow violet, poppy, wild hyacinth, and woodland star; and the green of the fields was opalescent with their colouring. Between the emerald of the buck-eyes, the grey-green of the pines, the golden and dark and bluish greens of the oaks, I caught glimpses of the snow-white Sierras to the east, and the faint blue of the Coast Range to the west, beyond the pale and lilac levels of the Sacramento valley. Following a vague trail, I went onwards across open fields where I had to thread my way among clustering boulders.

My thoughts were all of Guenevere, and I looked only with a casual and desultory eye at the picturesqueness and vernal beauty that environed my path. I was half-way between my cabin and the meeting-place, when I became suddenly aware that the sunlight had darkened, and glanced up, thinking, of course, that an April cloud, appearing unobserved from beyond the horizon, had passed across the sun. Imagine, then, my surprise when I saw that the azure of the entire sky had turned to a dun and sinister brown, in the midst of which the sun was clearly visible, burning like an enormous round red ember. Then, something strange and unfamiliar in the nature of my surroundings, which I was momentarily at a loss to define, forced itself upon my attention, and my surprise became a growing consternation. I stopped and looked about me, and realized, incredible as it seemed, that I had lost my way; for the pines on either hand were not those that I had expected to see. They were more gigantic, more gnarled, than the ones I remembered; and their roots writhed in wilder and more serpentine

contortions from a soil that was strangely lowerless, and where even the grass grew only in scanty tufts. There were boulders large as druidic monoliths, and the forms of some of them were such as one might see in a nightmare, Thinking, of course, that it must all be a dream, but with a sense of utter bewilderment which seldom if ever attends the absurdities and monstrosities of nightmare, I sought in vain to orient myself and to find some familiar landmark in the bizarre scene that lay before me.

A path, broader than the one I had been following, but running in what I judged to be the same direction, wound on among the trees. It was covered with a grey dust, which, as I went forward, became deeper and displayed footprints of a singular form — footprints that were surely too attenuate, too fantastically slender, to be human, despite their five toe-marks. Something about them, I know not what, something in the nature of their very thinness and elongation, made me shiver. Afterwards, I wondered why I had not recognized them for what they were; but at the time, no suspicion entered my mind — only a vague sense of disquietude, au indefinable trepidation.

As I proceeded, the pines amid which I passed became momentarily more fantastic and more sinister in the contortions of their boughs and boles and roots. Some were like leering hags; others were obscenely crouching gargoyles; some appeared to writhe in an eternity of hellish torture; others were convulsed as with a satanic merriment. All the while, the sky continued to darken slowly, the dun and dismal brown that I had first perceived turning through almost imperceptible changes of tone to a dead funereal purple, wherein the sun smouldered like a moon that had risen from a bath of blood. The trees and the whole landscape were saturated with this macabre purple, were immersed and steeped in its unnatural gloom. Only the rocks, as I went on, grew strangely paler; and their forms were somehow suggestive of headstones, of tombs and monuments. Beside the

trail, there was no longer the green of vernal grass — only an earth mottled by drying algae and tiny lichens the colour of verdigris. Also there were patches of evil-looking fungi with stems of a leprous pallor and blackish heads that drooped and nodded loathsomely.

The sky had now grown so dark that the whole scene took on a semi-nocturnal aspect, and made me think of a doomed world in the twilight of a dying sun. All was airless and silent; there were no birds, no insects, no sighing of the pines, no lispings of leaves: a baleful and preternatural silence, like the silence of the infinite void.

The trees became denser, then dwindled, and I came to a circular field. Here, there was no mistaking the nature of the monolithal boulders — they were headstones and funeral monuments, but so enormously ancient that the letterings or figures upon them were well-nigh effaced; and the few characters that I could distinguish were not of any known language. About them there the hoariness and mystery and terror of incomputable Eld. It was hard to believe that life and death could be as old as they. The trees around them were inconceivably gnarled and bowed as with an almost equal burden of years. The sense of awful antiquity that these stones and pines all served to convey increased the oppression of my bewilderment, confirmed my disquietude. Nor was I reassured when I noticed on the soft earth about the headstones a number of those attenuate footprints of which I have already spoken. They were disposed in a fashion that was truly singular seeming to depart from and return to the vicinity of each stone.

Now, for the first time, I heard a sound other than the sound of my own footfalls in the silence of this macabre scene. Behind me, among the trees, there was a faint and evil rattling. I turned and listened; there was something in these sounds that served to complete the demoralization of my

unstrung nerves; and monstrous fears, abominable fancies, trooped like the horde of a witches' sabbat through my brain.

The reality that I was now to confront was no less monstrous! There was a whitish glimmering in the shadow of the trees, and a human skeleton, bearing in its arms the skeleton of an infant, emerged and came towards me! Intent as on some ulterior cryptic purpose, some charnel errand not to be surmised by the living, it went by with a tranquil pace, an effortless and gliding tread in which, despite my terror and stupefaction, I perceived a certain horrible and feminine grace. I followed the apparition with my eyes as it passed among the monuments without pausing and vanished in the darkness of the pines on the opposite side of the field. No sooner had it gone, than a second, also bearing in its arms an infant skeleton, appeared, and passed before me in the same direction and with the same abominable and loathsome grace of movement.

A horror that was more than horror, a fear that was beyond fear, petrified all my faculties, and I felt as if I were weighted down by some ineluctable and insupportable burden of nightmare. Before me, skeleton after skeleton, each precisely like the last, with the same macabre lightness and ease of motion, each carrying its pitiful infant, emerged from the shadow of the ancient pines and followed where the first had disappeared, intent as on the same cryptic errand. One by one they came, till I had counted eight! Now I knew the origin of the bizarre footprints whose attenuation had disturbed and troubled me.

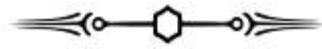
When the eighth skeleton had passed from sight, my eyes were drawn as by scene irresistible impulsion to one of the nearer headstones, beside which I was amazed to perceive what I had not noticed before: a freshly opened grave, gaping darkly in the soft soil. Then, at my elbow, I heard a low rattling, and the fingers of a fleshless hand plucked lightly at my sleeve.

A skeleton was beside me, differing only from the others through the fact that it bore no infant in its arms. With a lipless and ingratiating leer, it plucked again at my sleeve, as if to draw me towards the open grave, and its teeth clicked as if it were trying to speak. My senses and my brain aswirl with vertiginous terror, could endure no more: I seemed to fall and fall through deeps of infinite eddying blackness with the clutching terror of those fingers upon my arm, till consciousness was left behind in my descent.

When I came to, Guenevere was holding me by the arm, concern and puzzlement upon her sweet oval face, and I was standing among the boulders of the field appointed for our rendezvous.

‘What on earth is the matter with you, Herbert?’ she queried anxiously. ‘Are you ill? You were standing here in a daze when I came, and didn’t seem to hear or see me when I spoke to you. And I really thought you were going to faint when I touched your arm.’

The Phantoms of the Fire



IT WAS LATE summer, and the Georgetown road was deep with dust, which had settled like a dun pall on the bordering chaparral and pines. Since he had walked all the way from Auburn without securing a single lift, the man who was trudging along the road with the broiling afternoon sun on his back was hardly less dusty than the trees. He paused now and then to mop his face with a discoloured handkerchief, or to peer rather wistfully at the occasional cars which passed him without offering to stop. His clothing, though not actually ragged, was old and worn, and had the indescribable shapelessness of clothing that has been slept in. He was very thin, stoop-shouldered, and discouraged-looking; his general aspect was almost that of a professional tramp; and the people of the countryside were suspicious of tramps. ‘Well, I guess I’ll have t’ walk all the way,’ he said to himself, whining a little even in his thoughts. ‘But it ain’t much further now... Gosh, but things is hot an’ dry.’ He looked about him at the familiar landscape of parched grass, brushwood and yellow pines with an appraising eye. ‘Wonder there ain’t been more fires — there alluz is at this time o’ year.’

The man was Jonas McGillicuddy, and he was on his way home after a somewhat prolonged absence. His return was unannounced, and would prove as unexpected to his wife and three children as his departure had been. Tired of trying to extort a living from a small vineyard and pear-orchard of rocky El Dorado land, and tired also of the perennial nagging of his frail, sensitive-nerved and sorely disappointed wife, Jonas had left abruptly, three years before, after a quarrel of more than customary bitterness and acerbity with his helpmate. Since then, he had heard nothing

from his family, for the good and sufficient reason that he had not sought to communicate with them. His various attempts to earn a livelihood had proved scarcely more successful than the fruit-ranching venture, and he had drifted aimlessly and ineffectually from place to place, from situation to situation — a forlorn and increasingly desperate figure. For a man of such shifting, unstable temperament, when all else had failed him, and he had wearied of the hopeless struggle, it was not unnatural to think of returning. Time had softened his memory of his wife's undependable temper, of her shrewish outbursts; but he had not forgotten her motherly ways when she was in a more tractable humour, nor her excellent cooking.

Now, with empty pockets, since his last money had sufficed merely to pay his train-fare to Sacramento, Jonas was nearing the hills in which lay his forest-surrounded ranch beyond Georgetown. The country through which he tramped was sparsely peopled, and there were great stretches of softly rolling hills and low valleys that had not known the touch of cultivation. The ranches were often quite isolated. Beyond all, in the hazy blue of the distance, were the vague and spectral snows of the Sierras.

‘Gosh, but one of Matilda’s pear pies’ll taste good,’ thought the wanderer. His mouth began to water. He was not reflective enough, however, to wonder just what his reception would be, beyond an easy surmise that Matilda might give him a terrific scolding for his absence. ‘But mebbe she’ll be mighty glad t’see me, after all,’ he consoled himself; Then he tried to picture his children, the five-year-old boy and the girl-babies of three and two respectively whom he had last seen.

‘Guess they’ll have forgotten they had a papa,’ he mused. The afternoon had been utterly still and airless, with a sultry brooding in its silence. Now, from the northeast, along the road he was travelling, there came a gust of wind, and with it the unmistakable acrid odour of burnt grass and trees.

‘Hell, there has been a fire after all,’ muttered Jonas, with an uneasy start. He peered anxiously ahead, but could see no smoke above the dun and grey-green hills. ‘Guess it’s all out now, anyway.’

He came to the top of the low slope he was climbing, and saw before him the burnt area, which lay on both sides of the road and was of indeterminable extent. The brown foliage of heatseared oaks and the black skeletons of bushes and pines were everywhere. A few fallen logs and old stumps were still smoking a little, as is their wont for days after the extinguishment of a forest fire. It was a scene of complete and irremediable desolation.

Jonas hurried on, with a sense of growing panic, for he was now little more than a mile from his own property. He thought of the yellow pines that stood so close and tall about his cabin — the pines which he had wished to fell, but had spared at the earnest solicitation of the nature-loving Matilda.

“They’re so pretty, Jonas,” she had said, pleadingly. ‘I just can’t see them go.’

‘Hope the fire didn’t get into them pines,’ thought Jonas now. ‘Gosh, but I wish I’d cut ’em down when I wuz plannin’ to. It would have been a lot safer; and I’d have had the money for the wood, too.’

The road was strewn in places with ashen leaves, with the charcoal of fallen brands, and several trees had crashed across it, but had now been removed to permit the passage of traffic. It was hotter than ever, in this charred and blackened waste, for the brief gust of wind had fallen. The dust on Jonas’ cheeks was runnelled with sweat which he no longer paused to wipe away. Irresponsible as he was, a strange gravity had come over the wastrel, and he felt an ever-deepening premonition of calamity.

He came at last to the little by-road which turned off to his ranch from the Georgetown highway. Here, he found with a sinking heart, the fire had

also been, and had left nothing but devastation. In spite of his fatigue, he almost ran, with long, shambling steps, and rounding a turn in the by-road, saw that the fire had stopped at the very verge of his own property. The hillside orchard of stunted pear trees, the straggling vines of Mission and Muscat grapes, were quite as he remembered them; and beyond, in the grove of yellow pines, he could see the wreathing smoke that arose from the chimney of his cabin. Panting heavily, he paused, with a sense of relief and thanksgiving as poignant as anything of which his dulled heart was capable.

The sun had almost touched the horizon, as he climbed the winding road through the orchard and entered the grove above. Aisles of light perceptibly tinged with gold lay between the elongated shadows. Even to the sodden, insensitive Jonas, the beauty of the woodland scene, the magic of the sunset, the high, solemn, dark-green pines and the rich glow sifting among them on manzanita-bushes and beds of brown needles, were not without their charm. He drew a long breath, inhaling the clean balsams that the hot sun had drawn from the forest, and feeling as he did so a vague pleasure.

Now he could see his cabin, a long, four-roomed shack of plain, unpainted boards and weather-darkened shingles. A man in calico was standing in front of the steps. Two little girls were beside her, and he wondered as to the whereabouts of the boy, who had been a fragile youngster, always ailing and fretful. 'Mebbe Bill is sick agin,' mused Jonas. He was very glad to be home, but he felt a little doubtful, a trifle tremulous, as to the greeting he would receive from Matilda.

The woman looked up as he approached, shading her eyes with her hand from the last rays of the sun, which fell horizontally through the wood. He could see her apron, which was quite clean, as always, though worn and faded from many washings, like her dress. She did not seem to perceive him, but was apparently staring with great intentness at something among

the trees. The children also stared, and huddled closer to her, clinging to the hem of her gown.

Jonas tried to call out: 'Hello, Matilda,' but his throat was so dry and dusty that the words were no more than a hoarse whisper. He started to clear his throat, but the simple act was never finished, for at that moment, the whole scene before him, the trees, the cabin, the woman and the children, were lost in a roaring sheet of ruddy flame that seemed to come from all sides at once and blot out the entire world and the very sky as it towered full-grown in what could have been no more than the fraction of a second. A blast of intolerable heat, fierce as the breath of a thousand furnaces, blew in Jonas' face and swept him backwards like a hurricane. The mighty roaring pounded in his ears like a sea, and was mingled with human screams, as he went down into pitch-black gulfs of unconsciousness.

It was day when Jonas awoke, but he was too confused for a few instants to realize that the light was slanting through the tree-tops from a different direction, or that there was more of it than seemed normal in an evergreen forest. When his wits returned sufficiently to permit the comprehension of the fact that it was morning, he began to notice other things that were equally singular. He found that he was lying on his back among burnt needles, and above him towered the dark boles of fire-swept trees with the pitiful stumps of their cauterized branches. Darkly, indistinctly, in a sort of dull astonishment, he began to remember the events of the previous day, his return at sunset to the cabin, his glimpse of Matilda and the two children, and the allengulfing sheet of flame. He looked instinctively at his clothes, with the feeling that he must have been badly burnt; but there was no trace of fire on his raiment, and the black ashes about him were cold. Nor, when he reared himself on his elbow and peered around, was there the faintest thread of smoke to indicate a recent conflagration.

He arose and stepped towards the place where the cabin had stood. It was a heap of ashes, from which protruded the ends of charred beams.

‘My God!’ muttered Jonas. He felt utterly dazed, and his thoughts refused to align themselves, failing to form any sort of intelligible order.

As Jonas spoke, a man arose from where he had been stooping behind the wreckage of the cabin, furtively dropping some object which he held in his hands. Seeing Jonas, the man came forward hastily. He was a gaunt individual in dirty overalls, with the profile and the general air of a somewhat elderly and dilapidated buzzard. Jonas recognized him as Samuel Slocum, one of his neighbours.

‘Wal, Jonas McGillicuddy, so you’ve come back,’ exclaimed this individual in raucous tones of unfeigned surprise. ‘Ye’re a little too late, though,’ he went on, without pausing to let Jonas speak. ‘Everythin’ burnt up clean, four days ago.’

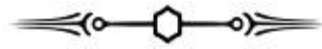
‘But the cabin wuz here las’ night,’ stammered Jonas. ‘I came through the woods ‘bout sunset, an’ I saw Matilda an’ the children in front o’ the steps, jus’ as plain as I see you. Then everythin’ seemed to go up in a burst o’ flame, an’ I didn’t know nothin’ till I woke up jus’ now.’

‘Ye’re crazy, Jonas,’ assured the neighbour. ‘Them weren’t no cabin here las’ night, an’ no Matildy an’ no children, neither. They wuz all burnt up, along with the rest o’ the countery hereabouts. We heerd yer wife an’ babies a-screamin’, but the fire wuzall aroun’ before ye could say Jack Robinson, an’ the trees fell across yer road, an’ no one could git in an’ no one could git out... I alluz told ye, Jonas, t’ cut them yellor pines down.’

‘My folks wuz all burnt up?’ faltered Jonas.

‘Wal, yer little boy died a year ago, so they wuz jus’ Matildy an’ the two gals.’

The Eternal World



CHRISTOPHER CHANDON WENT to his laboratory window for a last look at the mountain solitude about him, which, in all likelihood, he would never see again. With no faltering of his determination, and yet not wholly without regret, he stared at the rugged gully beneath, where the Gothic shade of firs and hemlocks was threaded by the brawling silver of a tiny stream. He saw the granite-sheeted slope beyond, and the two nearer peaks of the Sierras, whose slaty azure was tipped by the first autumn snow; and saw the pass between them that lay in a line with his apparent route through the time-space continuum.

Then he turned to the strange apparatus whose completion had cost him so many years of toil and experiment. On a raised platform in the center of the room, there stood a large cylinder, not without resemblance to a diving-bell. Its base and lower walls were of metal, its upper half was made wholly of indestructible glass.

A hammock, inclined at an angle of forty degrees, was slung between its sides. In this hammock, Chandon meant to lash himself securely, to insure as much protection as would be feasible against the unknown velocities of his proposed flight. Gazing through the clear glass, he could watch with comfort whatever visual phenomena the journey might offer.

The cylinder had been set directly in front of an enormous disk, ten feet in diameter, with a hundred perforations in its silvery surface. Behind it were ranged a series of dynamos, designed for the development of an obscure power, which, for want of a better name, Chandon had called the negative time-force. This power he had isolated with infinite labors from

the positive energy of time, that fourth-dimensional gravity which causes and controls the rotation of events.

The negative power, amplified a thousand-fold by the dynamos, would remove to an incalculable distance in contemporary time and space anything that stood in its path. It would not permit of travel into the past or future, but would cause an instant projection across the temporal stream that enfolds the entire cosmos in its endless, equal flowing.

Unfortunately, Chandon had not been able to construct a mobile machine, in which he could travel, as in a rocket-ship, and perhaps return as to his starting-point. He must plunge boldly and forever into the unknown. But he had furnished the cylinder with an oxygen apparatus, with electric light and heat, and a month's supply of food and water. Even if his flight should end in empty space, or in some world whose conditions would render human survival impossible, he would at least live long enough to make a thorough observation of his surroundings.

He had a theory, however, that his journey would not terminate in the midst of mere ether; that the cosmic bodies were nuclei of the time-gravity, and that the weakening of the propulsive force would permit the cylinder to be drawn to one of them.

The hazards of his venture were past foreseeing; but he preferred them to the safe, monotonous certitudes of earthly life. He had always chafed beneath a feeling of limitation, had longed only for the unexplored vastnesses. He could not brook the thought of any horizons, other than those which have never been overpassed.

With a strange thrilling in his heart, he turned from the alpine landscape and proceeded to lock himself in the cylinder. He had installed a timing device, which would automatically start the dynamos at a given hour.

Lying in the hammock beneath leather straps that he had buckled about his waist, ankles and shoulders, he still had a minute or so to wait before the turning on of the power. In those moments, for the first time, there swept upon him in an unleashed flood the full terror and peril of his experiment; and he was almost tempted to unbind himself and leave the cylinder before it was too late. He had all the sensations of one who is about to be blown from a cannon's mouth.

Suspended in a weird silence, from which all sound had been excluded by the air-tight walls, he resigned himself to the unknown, with many conflicting surmises as to what would occur. He might or might not survive the passage through unfamiliar dimensions, at speed to which the velocity of light would be laggard. But if he did survive, he might reach the farthest galaxies in a mere flash.

His fears and surmises were terminated by something that came with the suddenness of sleep — or death. Everything seemed to dissolve and vanish in a bright flare; and then there passed before him a swarming, broken panorama, a babel of impressions ineffably various and multiplied. It seemed to him that he possessed a thousand eyes with which to apprehend in one instant the flowing of many æons, the passing of countless worlds.

The cylinder seemed no longer to exist; and he did not appear to be moving. But all the systems of time were going by him, and he caught the scraps and fragments of a million scenes: objects, faces, forms, angles and colors which he recalled later as one recalls the deliriously amplified and distorted visions of certain drugs.

He saw the giant evergreen forests of lichen, the continents of Brobdingnagian grasses, in planets remoter than the systems of Hercules. Before him there passed, like an architectural pageant, the mile-high cities that wear the sumptuous aerial motley of rose and emerald and Tyrian,

wrought by the tangent beams of triple suns. He beheld unnameable things in spheres unlisted by astronomers. There crowded upon him the awful and limitless evolutionary range of transtellar life, the cyclorama of teeming morphologies.

It seemed as if the barriers of his brain had been extended to include the whole of the cosmic flux; that his thought, like the web of some mammoth and divine arachnid, had woven itself from world to world, from galaxy to galaxy, above the dread gulfs of the infinite continuum.

Then, with the same suddenness that had marked its beginning, the vision came to an end and was replaced by something of a totally different character.

It was only afterwards that Chandon could figure out what had occurred, and divine the nature and laws of the new environment into which he had been projected. At the time (if one can use a word so inaccurate as time) he was wholly incapable of anything but a single contemplative visual impression — the strange world upon which he looked through the clear wall of the cylinder: a world that might have been the dream of some geometrician mad with infinity.

It was like some planetary glacier, fretted into shapes of ordered grotesquery, filled with a white, unglittering light, and obeying the laws of other perspectives than those of our own world. The distances on which he gazed were literally interminable; there was no horizon; and yet nothing seemed to dwindle in size or definitude, whatever its remoteness. Part of the impression received by Chandon was that this world arched back upon itself, like the interior surface of a hollow sphere; that the pale vistas returned overhead after they had vanished from his view.

Nearer to him than any other object in the scene, and preserving the same relative distance as in his laboratory, he perceived a large circular section of

rough planking — that portion of the laboratory wall which had lain in the path of the negative beam. It hung motionless in air, as if suspended by a field of invisible ice.

The foreground beyond the planking was thronged by innumerable rows of objects that were suggestive both of statues and of crystalloid formations. Wan as marble or alabaster, each of them presented a mélange of simple curves and symmetric angles, which somehow seemed to include the latency of almost endless geometrical development. They were gigantic, with a rudimentary division into head, limbs and body, as if they were living things. Behind them, at indefinite distances, were other forms that might have been the blind buds or frozen blossoms of unknown vegetable growths.

Chandon had no sense of the passing of time as he peered from the cylinder. He could remember nothing, could imagine nothing. He was unaware of his body, or the hammock in which he lay, except as a half-seen image on the rim of vision.

Somehow, in that strange, frozen impression, he felt the inert dynamism of the forms about him: the silent thunder, the unlaunched lightnings, as of cataleptic gods; the atom-folded heat and flame, as of unlit suns. Inscrutably they brooded before him, as they had done from all eternity and would continue to do forever. In this world, there could be no change, no event: all things must preserve the same aspect and the same attitude.

As he realized later, his attempt to change his own position in the time stream had led to an unforeseen result. He had projected himself beyond time into some further cosmos where the very ether, perhaps, was a non-conductor of the time-force, and in which, therefore, the phenomena of temporal sequence were impossible.

The sheer velocity of his flight had lodged him on the verge of this eternity, like some Arctic explorer caught in everlasting ice. There, obedient to the laws of timelessness, he seemed fated to remain. Life, as we know the term, was impossible for him; and yet — since death would involve a time-sequence, it was equally impossible for him to die. He must maintain the position in which he had landed, must hold the breath he had been breathing at the moment of his impact against the eternal. He was fixed in a catalepsy of the senses; in a bright Nirvana of contemplation.

It would seem, according to all logic, that there was no escape from his predicament. However, I must now relate the strangest thing of all; the thing that was seemingly unaccountable; that defied the proven laws of the timeless sphere.

Into the glacial field of Chandon's vision, athwart the horizonless ranks of immutable figures, there came an intruding object; a thing that drifted as if through æons; that grew upon the scene with the slowness of some millennial coral reef in a crystal sea.

Even from its first appearance, the object was plainly alien to the scene; was obviously, like Chandon's cylinder and the wall section, of non-eternal origin. It was black and unlustrous, with more than the blackness of intrastellar space or of metals locked from light in the core of planets. It forced itself upon the sight with ultra-material solidity; and yet it seemed to refuse the crystal daylight, to insulate itself from the never-varying splendor.

The Strange Captor

The thing disclosed itself as a sharp and widening wedge, driven upon the adamantine ether, and forming, by the same violent act of irruption, a new

visual image in Chandon's paralytic eyes. In defiance of the mental laws of his surroundings, it caused him to form an idea of duration and movement.

Seen in its entirety, the thing was a large, spindle-shaped vessel, dwarfing Chandon's cylinder like an ocean liner beside a ship's dinghy. It floated aloof and separate — a seamless mass of unbroken ebon, swelling to an orb-like equator, and dwindling to a point at each end. The form was such as might have been calculated to pierce some obdurate medium.

The substance of which it had been wrought, and its motive power, were destined to remain unknown to Chandon. Perhaps it was driven by some tremendous concentration of the time-force with which he had played so ignorantly and ineptly.

The intruding vessel, wholly stationary, hung now above the rows of statuesque entities that were foremost in his field of vision. By infinite gradations, a huge circular door seemed to open in its bottom; and from the opening there issued a crane-like arm, of the same black material as the vessel. The arm ended in numerous pendent bars, that somehow gave the idea of finger-like suppleness.

It descended upon the head of one of the strange geometric images; and the myriad bars, bending and stretching with slow but limitless fluidity, wrapped themselves like a net of chains about the crystalloid body. Then the figure was dragged upward as if with herculean effort, and vanished at length, together with the shortening arm, in the vessel's interior.

Again the arm emerged, to repeat the bizarre, impossible abduction, and draw another of the enigmatic things from its everlasting station. And once more the arm descended, and a third entity was taken, like the theft of still another marble god from its marble heaven.

All this was done in profound silence — the immeasurable slowness of motion being muffled by the ether, and creating nothing that Chandon's ear

could apprehend as sound.

After the third disappearance with its strong prey, the arm returned, extending itself diagonally and to greater length than before, till the black fingers barred the glass of Chandon's cylinder and closed upon it with their irresistible clutch.

He was scarcely aware of any movement; but it seemed to him that the ranks of white figures, the unhorizoned and never-dwindling vistas, were sinking slowly from his ken, like a foundering world. He saw the ebon bulk of the great vessel, toward which he was drawn by the shortening arm, till it filled his entire vision. Then the cylinder was lifted into the night-black opening, where it seemed that light was powerless to follow.

Chandon could see nothing; he was aware of nothing but solid darkness, enfolding the cylinder even as it had been enfolded by the white, achromatic light of timelessness. He felt about him the sense of long, tremendous vibration; a soundless pulsing that seemed to spread in circles from some dynamic center; to pass over and beyond him through æons, as if from some Titanic heart whose beats defied the environing eternity.

Simultaneously, he realized that his own heart was beating again, with the same protraction as this unknown pulse; that he drew breath and exhaled it in obedience to the cyclical vibration. In his benumbed brain, there grew the nascent idea of wonder; the first beginning of a natural thought-sequence. His body and mind were beginning to function once more, beneath the influence of the power that had been strong enough to intrude upon the timeless universe and pluck him from that petrifying ether.

The vibration began to swiften, spreading outward in mighty ripples. It became audible as a cyclopean pounding; and Chandon somehow conceived the idea of giant-built machinery, turning and throbbing in an underworld prison. The vessel seemed to be forging onward with resistless

power through some material barrier. Doubtless it was wrenching itself free from the eternal dimension, was tearing its way back into time.

The blackness had persisted for awhile, like a positive radiation rather than the mere absence of light. Now it cleared away and was replaced by an all-revealing, ruddy illumination. At the same time, the loud, engine-like vibration died to a muted throbbing. Perhaps the darkness had been in some manner associated with the full development of the strange force that had enabled the vessel to move and function in that ultra-temporal medium. With the return into time, and the diminishment of power, it had vanished.

The faculties of thought, feeling, cognition and movement, under their normal time-aspects, all came back to Chandon like the loosing of a dammed-up flood. He was able to correlate all that occurred to him, and infer in some measure the meaning of his unique experience. With growing awe and astonishment, he studied the scene that was visible from his position in the hammock.

The cylinder, with the weird, crystalloid figures looming near at hand, was reposing in a huge room, probably the main hold of the vessel. The interior of this room was curved like a sphere; and all about and above, gigantic, unfamiliar machineries were disposed. Not far away, he saw the retracted crane or arm. It seemed that the force of gravitation inhered everywhere in the vessel's inner surface; for certain peculiar beings passed before Chandon as he watched, and ran upward on the walls till they hung inverted from the ceiling with the nonchalance of flies.

There were perhaps a dozen of these beings within sight. No one with earthly biologic prepossessions could even have imagined them very readily. Each of them possessed a roughly globular body with the upper hemisphere swelling mid-way between pole and equator to form two neckless, conical heads. The lower hemisphere terminated in many limbs

and appendages, some of which were used for walking and others solely for prehension.

The heads were featureless, but a glittering, web-like membrane hung between them, trembling continually. Certain of the nether appendages, waving like inquisitive tentacles, were tipped with organs that may have served for eyes, ears, nostrils and mouths.

These creatures shone with a silvery light and appeared to be almost translucent. In the center of the pointed heads, a spot of coal-bright crimson glowed and faded with pulse-like regularity; and the spherical bodies darkened and lightened as if with the rhythmic interchange of rib-like zones of shadow beneath their surfaces. Chandon felt that they were formed of some non-protoplasmic substance, perhaps a mineral that had organized itself into living cells. Their movements were very quick and dexterous, with an inhuman poise; and they seemed able to perform many different motions with perfect simultaneity.

The Timeless World

The earth-man was stricken to renewed immobility by the strangeness of it all. With vain, fantastical surmises, he sought to fathom the mystery. Who were these creatures, and what had been their purpose in penetrating the eternal dimension? Why had they removed certain of its inhabitants, together with himself? Whither was the vessel bound? Was it returning, somewhere in time and space, to the planetary world from which it had set forth on its weird voyage?

He could be sure of nothing; but he knew that he had fallen into the hands of super-scientific beings, who were expert navigators of space-time. They had been able to build a vessel such as he had merely dreamt of

building; and perhaps they had explored and charted all the unknown deeps, and had deliberately planned their incursion into the frozen world beyond.

If they had not come to rescue him, he would never have escaped from the doom of timelessness, into which he had been hurled by his own clumsy effort to cross the secular stream.

Pondering, he turned to the giant things that were his companions. He could scarcely recognize them in the red glow: their pallid planes and angles seemed to have undergone a subtle rearrangement; and the light quivered upon them in bloody lusters, conferring an odd warmth, a suggestion of awaking life. More than ever, they gave the impression of latent power, of frozen dynamism.

Then, suddenly, he saw an unmistakable movement from one of the statue-like entities, and realized that the thing had begun to alter its shape! The cold, marble substance seemed to flow like quicksilver. The rudimentary head assumed a stern, many-featured form, such as might belong to the demi-god of some foreign world. The limbs lightened, and new members of indeterminate use were put forth. The simple curves and angles multiplied themselves with mysterious complexity. A diamond-shaped eye, glowing with blue fire, appeared in the face and was quickly followed by other eyes. The thing seemed to be undergoing, in a few moments, the entire process of some long-suspended evolution.

Chandon saw that the other figures were displaying singular alterations; though in each case the ensuing development was wholly individual. The geometric facets began to swell like opening buds, and flowed into lines of celestial beauty and grandeur. The boreal pallor was suffused with unearthly iridescence, with opal tones that raced and trembled in ever-living patterns, in belted arabesques, in rainbow hieroglyphs.

The human watcher felt the insurgence of a measureless élan, of a super-stellar intellection, in these remarkable beings. A thrill of terror, electric, eerie, ran through him. The process he had just seen was too incalculable, too tremendous. Who, or what, could limit and control the unsealed activities of these Eternal Ones, aroused from their slumber? Surely he was in the presence of beings akin to gods, to the demons or genii of myth. That which he beheld was like the opening of the sea-recovered jars of Solomon.

He saw that the marvellous transformation had also been perceived by the owners of the vessel. These creatures, thronging from all parts of the spheroid interior, began to crowd around the timeless entities. Their mechanical, darting motions, the lifting and levelling of certain members that ended in eye-shaped organs, betrayed an unhuman excitement and curiosity. They seemed to be inspecting the transfigured forms with the air of learned biologists who had been prepared for such an event and were gratified by its consummation.

The Timeless Ones, it appeared, were also curious regarding their captors. Their flaming eyes returned the stare of the periscopic tentacles, and certain odd horn-shaped appendages of their lofty crowns began to quiver inquisitively, as if with the reception of unknown sense-impressions. Then, suddenly, each of the three put forth a single, jointless arm, emitting in mid-air seven long, fan-like rays of purple light in lieu of a hand.

These rays, no doubt, were capable of receiving and conveying tactile impressions. Slowly and deliberately, like groping fingers, they reached out, and each of the fans, curving fluctuantly where it encountered a rounded surface, began to play with a rhythmic flaring about the foremost of the double-headed creatures.

These beings, as if in alarm or discomfort, drew back and sought to elude the searching rays. The purple fingers lengthened, encircled them, held

them helpless, ran about them in broadening, clinging zones, as if to explore their whole anatomy. From the two heads to the disk-like pads that served them for feet, the beings were swarthed around with flowing rings and ribbons of light.

Others of the vessel's crew, beyond reach of the curious beams, had darted back to a more secure distance. One of them lifted certain of his members in a swift, emphatic gesture. As far as Chandon could see, the being had not touched any of the vessel's machinery. But as if in obedience to the gesture, a huge, round, mirror-like mechanism overhead began to revolve in its frame on massive pivots.

The mechanism appeared to be made of some pale, lucid substance, neither glass nor metal. Ceasing its rotation, as if the desired focus had been secured, the lens emitted a beam of hueless light, which somehow reminded Chandon of the chill, frozen radiance of the eternal world. This beam, falling on the timeless entities, was plainly repressive in its effect.

Immediately the finger-like rays relinquished their quarry, and faded back to the jointless arms, which were then retracted. The eyes closed like hidden jewels, the opal patterns grew cold and dull, and the strange, half-divine beings appeared to lose their complex angles, to regain their former quiescence, like devolving crystals. Yet, somehow, they were still alive, they still retained the nascent lines of their preternatural efflorescence.

In his awe and wonder before this miraculous tableau, Chandon had automatically freed himself from the leather bands, had risen from the hammock, and was standing with his face pressed against the wall of the cylinder. His change of position was noted by the vessel's crew, and their eye-tentacles were all raised and levelled upon him for a moment, following the devolution of The Timeless Ones.

Then, in response to another enigmatic gesture from one of their number, the giant lens rotated a little further, and the glacial beam began to shift and widen, till it played upon the cylinder though still including in its hueless range the dynamic figures.

The earth-man had the sensation of being caught in a motionless flood of something that was inexpressibly thick and viscid. His body seemed to congeal, his thoughts crawled with painful slowness through some obstructing medium that had permeated his very brain. It was not the complete arrest of all the life-processes that had been entailed by his impingement upon eternity. Rather, it was a deceleration of these processes; a subjection to some unthinkably retarded rhythm of time-movement and sequence.

Whole years seemed to intervene betwixt the beats of Chandon's heart. The crooking of his little finger would have required lustrums. Through tediously elongated time, his brain strove to form a single thought: the suspicion that his captors had been alarmed by his change of posture, and had apprehended some troublous demonstration of power from him, as from the Timeless Ones.

Then, through further decades, he conceived another thought: that he himself was perhaps regarded as one of the god-like beings by these alien time-voyagers. They had found him in eternity, amid the measureless ranks; and how were they to know that he, like themselves, had come originally from a temporal world.

With his altered sense of duration, the earth-man could form no proper conception of the length of the voyage in time-space. To him, it was almost another eternity, punctuated at lustrum-long intervals by the humming vibration of the machinery. To his delayed visual perception, the crew of the vessel seemed to move with incredible sluggishness, by imperceptible

gradations. He, with his weird companions, had been set apart by the chill beam in a prison of slow time, while the ship itself was plunging through fathomless dimensions of secular and cosmic infinitude!

At last the voyage came to an end. Chandon felt the gradual dawning of an all-pervasive light that drowned the vessel's ruddy glow in fierce whiteness. By infinite degrees, the walls became perfectly transparent, together with the machinery, and he realized that the light was coming from a world without. Immense images, multiform and intricate, began to crowd with the slowness of creation itself upon the glaring splendor. Then — doubtless to permit the removal of the guarded captives — the retarding ray was switched off, and Chandon recovered his normal powers of cognition and movement.

He beheld an awesome vision through the clear wall, whose transparenence was perhaps due to the complete turning-off of the vessel's motive-power. He saw that the vessel was reposing in a diamond-shaped area, surrounded with architectural piles whose very magnitude imposed itself like an irremovable weight upon his senses.

Far up, in a fiery orange sky, he saw the looming of bulbous Atlantean pillars with platform capitals; the thronging of strange cruciform towers; he viewed with amazement the eerie wonder of unnatural cupolas that were like inverted pyramids. He saw the spiral pinnacles that seemed to support an unbelievable burden of terraces; the slanting walls, like fluted mountain-scarps, that formed the base of imagineless cumuli. All were wrought of some shining, night-black stone, like a marble quarried from an ultra-cosmic Erebus. They interposed their heavy, lowering, malignant masses between Chandon and the flames of a hidden sun that was incomparably more brilliant than our own.

Blinded by the glare and dizzyed by those lofty piles; aware also of queer heaviness in all his bodily sensations, doubtless due to an increased gravity, the earth-man turned his attention to the foreground. The diamond area, he now saw, was thronged with people similar to the crew of the time-vessel. Like giant, silvery, globular-bodied insects, they came hurrying from all directions on the dark pavement. Arranged in a ring about the vessel, were colossal mounted mirrors, of the same type that had emitted the retarding ray. The gathering people stopped at some little distance, leaving a clear space between the ray-machines and the ship, as if for the landing of the crew and captives.

Now, as if in response to some hidden mechanism, a huge, circular door was opened in the seamless wall. The folded crane began to lengthen, and covered one of the timeless beings with its mesh of tentacles. Then the mysterious entity, still quiet and unresisting, was lifted through the aperture and deposited on the pavement outside.

The arm returned, and repeated this procedure with the second figure, which, in the meanwhile, had apparently realized the cessation of the retarding beam, and was less submissive than its fellow had been. It offered a rather tentative resistance, and began to swell as the tentacles enfolded it, and to put forth pseudopodic members and finger-like rays that plucked gently at the tightening mesh. However, in a few moments, the second being had joined its companion in the world without.

The Revolt of the Timeless Ones

At the same time, a startling change had begun to manifest itself in the third figure. Chandon felt as if he were present at the epiphany of some æon-veiled and secluded god, revealing himself in his true likeness from the molten chrysalis of matter. The transformation that occurred was as if some

chill stalagmite should burgeon forth in a thousand-featured shape of cloud and fire. In one apocalyptic moment, the thing seemed to expand, to rush upward, to change its entire substance, to develop organs and attributes such as could belong only to a super-material stage of evolution. Æons of star-life, of world-life, of the slow alchemy of atoms, were abridged in that instant.

Chandon could form no clear conception of what was happening. The metamorphosis was too far beyond the normal interpretative range of human senses. He saw something that towered before him, filling the vessel to its roof and pressing terribly against the curved transparent surface. Then, with inestimable violence, the entire vessel broke in a thousand flying, glittering, glass-like fragments, that shrieked with the high, thin note of tortured things as they hurtled and fell in all directions.

Before the last fragments had fallen, the time-cylinder was caught and drawn upward from the wreck as if by some mighty hand. Whether the looming giant had reached down with one of its non-human members, or whether the cylinder had been lifted by magnetic force, was never wholly clear to Chandon. All he could remember afterwards was the light, aerial soaring, in which he experienced a sudden and complete relief from the heavy gravitation of that unknown planet.

He seemed to float very swiftly to an elevation hard to estimate, from the absence of familiar scale; and then the cylinder came to rest on the cloud-like shoulder of the Timeless One, and clung there as securely as if it had landed on the shore of some far-off, separate world, aloof in space.

He was beyond awe or surprise or bewilderment. As if in some cataclysmic dream, he resigned himself to the unfolding of the swift miracle. He peered out from his airy vantage, and saw above him, like the topmost crag of a lofty cumulus, with stormy suns for eyes, the head of the

being who had shattered the alien time-vessel and had risen above its ruins like a loosed and rebellious genie.

Far down, he beheld the black diamond area that swarmed with the silvery people. Then, from the pavement, there rushed heavenward, like the pillared fumes of a monstrous explosion, the mounting and waxing forms of the other Timeless Ones. Tumultuous, awful, cyclonic, they rose beside the first, to complete that rebel trinity. Yet, vast and tall as they had grown, the pylons around them were taller; the terrace-bearing pinnacles, the topsy-turvy pyramids, the cruciform towers, still frowned upon them from the glowing, coal-bright air like the dark, colossal guardians of a trans-galactic hell.

Chandon was aware of a thousand impressions. He felt the divine and limitless energies, waked from eternal sleep, that were flowering with such dynamic violence in time. And he felt, warring with these, endeavoring to subdue and constrain them, the jarring radiations and malignly concentrated powers of the new world. The very light was inimical and tyrannous in its fiery beating; the blackness of the lowering domes and peristyles was like the crushing fall of a thousand muted maces, swung by sullen, cruel, silent Anakim. The lens-machines on the pavement, revolving, glared upward like the eyes of boreal Cyclops, and turned their frosted beams on the cloudy giants. At intervals, the sky lightened with a white-hot flaring, like the reflex of a million remote furnaces; and Chandon was aware of surly, infra-bass, reverberant, bell-toned clangors, of drum-notes loud as beaten worlds, that impinged upon him from all quarters of the throbbing air.

The environing piles appeared to darken, as if they had gathered to themselves a more evil and positive ebon, and were raying it forth to stupefy the senses. But beyond this, beyond all physical perceptions, Chandon felt the black magnetism that surged in never-ceasing waves; that

clamored before the barriers of his will, that sought to usurp his mind, to wrest and shape his very thoughts into forms of monstrous thralldom.

Wordless, and conveyed in thronging images of terrible strangeness, he caught the biddings of unhuman bane, of transtellary hatred. The very stones of the massive buildings were joined with the brains of that exotic people in an effort to resume control of Chandon and the three Timeless Ones!

Darkly, the earth-man understood. He must not only submit to the silvery beings, he must do their will in all things. He and his companions had been brought from eternity for a purpose — to aid their captors in some stupendous war with a rival people of the same world. Even as mankind employs in warfare explosives of Titanic potency, the silver creatures had desired to employ the time-loosed energies of the Eternal Ones against their otherwise equally matched foes! They had known the route through secret dimensions from time into timelessness. With well-nigh demoniac audacity, they had planned and executed the weird abduction; and they had assumed that Chandon was one of the eternal entities, with latencies of immense élan and god-like power.

The waves of evil monition rose ever higher. Chandon felt himself inundated, swamped. With televisic clearness, there grew in his mind a picture of the foe against whom he was being adjured to go forth. He saw the glaring perspectives of remote, unearthly lands, the mightily swarming piles of unhuman cities, lying beneath an incandescent sun that was vaster than Antares. For a moment, he felt himself hating these lands and cities with the cold, imagineless rancor of an otherworld psychology.

Then, as if he had been lifted above it by the giant upon whose shoulder he rode, Chandon knew that the black sea was no longer beating upon him. He was free from the clutching mesmerism, he could no longer conceive the

alien emotions and pictures that had invaded his mind. Miraculous ease and sublime security enveloped him; he was the center of a sphere of resistant and resilient force, which nothing could subdue or penetrate.

Sitting as if on a mountain throne, he saw that the demiurgic triad, contemptuous and defiant of the pygmies beneath, had resumed their magic growth and were shooting upward to attain and surpass the level of the topmost piles. A moment more, and he peered across the Babelian tiers of sullen stone, crowded with the silver people, and saw the outer avenues of a mammoth metropolis; and beyond these, the far-flung horizons of the unnamed planet.

He seemed to know the thoughts of the Timeless Ones as they looked forth on this world whose impious people had dreamt to enslave their illimitable essence. He knew that they saw and comprehended it all in a glance. He felt them pause in momentary curiosity; and felt the swift, relentless anger, the irrevocable decision, that followed.

Then, very tentatively and deliberately, as if they were testing their untried powers, the three beings began to destroy the city. From the head of Chandon's white, supernal bearer, there issued a circle of ruby flame, to detach itself, to spin and broaden in a great wheel as it slanted down and settled on one of the higher piles. Beneath that burning crown, the unnatural-angled domes and inverse pyramids began to quiver, and seemed to expand like a dark vapor. They lost their solid outlines, they tightened, they took on the patterns of shaken sand, they shuddered skyward in rhythmic circles of somber, deathly iris, paling and vanishing upon the intolerable glare.

From the Timeless Ones, there emanated the visible and invisible agencies of annihilation; slowly at first, and then with cyclonic acceleration,

as if their anger were mounting or they were becoming more engrossed in the awful and godlike game.

From out their celestial bodies, as from high crags there leaped living rivers and raging cataracts of energy; there descended bolts, orbs, ellipsoid wheels of white or vari-colored fire, to fall on the doomed city like a rain of ravening meteors. The builded cumuli dissolved into molten slag, the columns and piled terraces passed in driven wraiths of steam, under the burning tempest. The city ran in swift torrents of lava: it quivered away in spirals of spectral dust; it rose in black flames, in sullen auroras.

Over its ruins, there moved the Eternal Ones, clearing for themselves an instant way. Behind them, in the black and clean-swept levels whereon they had trodden, foci of dissolution appeared, and the very soil and stone dissolved in ever-spinning, widening vortices, that ate the surface of the planet and bored down upon its core. As if they had taken into their own substance the molecules and electrons of all that they had destroyed, the Eternal Ones grew ever taller and vaster.

Chandon beheld it all from his fantastic aerie with supernal remoteness and detachment. In a moving zone of inviolate peace, he saw the fiery rain that consumed the ultra-galactic Sodom; he saw the belts of devastation that ran and radiated, broadening ever, to the four quarters; he peered from an ever-loftier height upon vast horizons, that fled as in reeling terror before the timeless giants.

Faster and faster played the lethal orbs and beams. They spawned in mid-air, they gave birth to countless others. They were sown abroad like the dragon's teeth of fable, to follow the longitudes of the great planet to its poles. The stricken city was soon left behind, and the giants marched on monstrous seas and deserts, on broad plains and high mountain-walls, where other cities shone far down like littered pebbles.

There were tides of atomic fire that went before to wash down the prodigious alps. There were vengeful, flying globes that turned the seas into instant vapor, that smote the deserts to molten, stormy oceans. There were arcs, circles, quadrilaterals of annihilation, growing always, that sank downward through the basic stone.

The fire-bright noon was muffled with chaotic murk. A bloody Cyclops, a red Laocoön, battling with serpent-coils of cloud and shadow, the mighty sun seemed to stagger in mid-heaven, to rush dizzily to and fro as the world reeled beneath that intolerable trampling of macro-cosmic Titans. The lands below were veiled by mephitic fumes, riven momentarily to disclose the heaving and foundering continents.

Now to that stupendous chaos the very elements of the doomed world were adding their unleashed energies. Clouds that were black Himalayas with realm-wide lightning, followed behind the destroyers. The ground crumbled to release the central fires in volcanic geysers, in skyward-flowing cataracts. The seas ebbed, revealing dismal peaks and long-submerged ruins, as they roared in their nether channels to be sucked down through earthquake-riven beds to feed the boiling cauldrons of internal disruption.

The air went mad with thunders as of Typhon breaking forth from his underworld dungeon; with roaring as of spire-tongued fires in the red pits of a crumbling inferno: with moaning and whining as of djinns trapped by the fall of mountains in some unscalable abyss; with howling as of frantic demons, loosed from primordial tombs.

Above the tumult, higher and higher, Chandon was borne, till he looked down from the calm altitude of ether; till he gazed from a sun-like vantage upon the seething and shattered orb, and saw the huge sun itself from an equal height in space. The cataclysmic moan, the mad thunder, seemed to

die away. The seas of catastrophic ruin eddied like a shallow backwash about the feet of the Timeless Ones. The furious, all-devouring maelstroms were no more than some ephemeral puff of dust, stirred by the casual step of a passer-by.

Then, beneath him, there was no longer the nebulous wrack of a world. The being upon whose shoulder he still clung, like an atom to some planetary parapet, was striding through cosmic emptiness; and spurned by its departure, the ruinous ball was flung abyssward after the receding sun around which it had revolved with all its vanished enigmas of alien life and civilization.

Dimly the earth-man saw the inconceivable vastness to which the Eternal Ones had attained. He beheld their glimmering outlines, the vague masses of their forms, with stars behind them, seen as through the luminous veil of comets. He was perched on a nebular thing, huge as the orbit of systems, and moving with more than the velocity of light, that strode through unnamed galaxies, through never-charted dimensions of space and time. He felt the immeasurable eddying of ether, he saw the labyrinthine swirling of stars, that formed and faded and were replaced by the fleeing patterns of other stellar mazes. In sublime security, in his sphere of dream-like ease and motion, Chandon was borne on without knowing why or whither; and, like the participant of some prodigious dream, he did not even ask himself such questions as these.

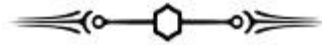
After infinities of flying light, of whirling and falling emptiness: after the transit of many skies, of unnumbered systems, there came to him the sense of a sudden pause. For one moment, from the still gulf, he gazed on a tiny sun with its entourage of nine planets, and wondered vaguely if the sun were some familiar astronomic body.

Then, with ineffable lightness and velocity, it seemed to him that he was falling toward one of the nearer worlds. The blurred and broadening mass of its seas and continents surged up to meet him; he seemed to descend, meteor-like, on a region of rough mountains sharp with snowy pinnacles that rose above somber spires of pine.

There, as if he had been deposited by some all-mighty hand, the cylinder came to rest; and Chandon peered out with the eerie startlement of an awakened dreamer, to see around him the walls of his own Sierran laboratory! The Timeless Ones, omniscient, by some benignant whim, had returned him to his own station in time and space; and then had gone on, perhaps to the conquest of other universes; perhaps to find again the white, eternal world of their origin and to fold themselves anew in the pale Nirvana of immutable contemplation.

THE END

Vulthoom



TO A CURSORY observer, it might have seemed that Bob Haines and Paul Septimus Chanler had little enough in common, other than the predicament of being stranded without funds on an alien world.

Haines, the third assistant pilot of an ether-liner, had been charged with insubordination by his superiors, and had been left behind in Ignarh, the commercial metropolis of Mars, and the port of all space-traffic. The charge against him was wholly a matter of personal spite; but so far, Haines had not succeeded in finding a new berth; and the month's salary paid to him at parting had been devoured with appalling swiftness by the pirate rates of the *Tellurian Hotel*.

Chanler, a professional writer of interplanetary fiction, had made voyage to Mars to fortify his imaginative talent by a solid groundwork of observation and experience. His money had given out after a few weeks; and fresh supplies, expected from his publisher, had not yet arrived.

The two men, apart from their misfortunes, shared an illimitable curiosity concerning all things Martian. Their thirst for the exotic, their proclivity for wandering into places usually avoided by terrestrials, had drawn them together in spite of obvious differences of temperament and had made them fast friends.

Trying to forget their worries, they had spent the past day in the queerly piled and huddled maze of old Ignarh, called by the Martians Ignar-Vath, on the eastern side of the great Yahan Canal. Returning at the sunset hour, and following the estrade of purple marble beside the water, they had nearly

reached the mile-long bridge that would take them back to the modern city, Ignar-Luth, in which were the terrestrial consulates and shipping-offices and hotels.

It was the Martian hour of worship, when the Aihais gather in their roofless temples to implore the return of the passing sun. Like the throbbing of feverish metal pulses, a sound of ceaseless and innumerable gongs punctured the thin air. The incredibly crooked streets were almost empty; and only a few barges, with immense rhomboidal sails of mauve and scarlet, crawled to and fro on the somber green waters.

The light waned with visible swiftness behind the top-heavy towers and pagoda-angled pyramids of Ignar-Luth. The chill of the coming night began to pervade the shadows of the huge solar gnomons that lined the canal at frequent intervals. The querulous clangors of the gongs died suddenly in Ignar-Vath, and left a weirdly whispering silence. The buildings of the immemorial city bulked enormous upon a sky of blackish emerald that was already thronged with icy stars.

A medley of untraceable exotic odors was wafted through the twilight. The perfume was redolent of alien mystery, and it thrilled and troubled the Earthmen, who became silent as they approached the bridge, feeling the oppression of eery strangeness that gathered from all sides in the thickening gloom. More deeply than in daylight, they apprehended the muffled breathings and hidden, tortuous movements of a life for ever inscrutable to the children of other planets. The void between Earth and Mars had been traversed; but who could cross the evolutionary gulf between Earthman and Martian?

The people were friendly enough in their taciturn way: they had tolerated the intrusion of terrestrials, had permitted commerce between the worlds. Their languages had been mastered, their history studied, by terrene

savants. But it seemed that there could be no real interchange of ideas. Their civilization had grown old in diverse complexity before the foundering of Lemuria; its sciences, arts, religions, were hoary with inconceivable age; and even the simplest customs were the fruit of alien forces and conditions.

At that moment, faced with the precariousness of their situation, Haines and Chanler felt an actual terror of the unknown world that surrounded them with its measureless antiquity.

They quickened their paces. The wide pavement that bordered the canal was seemingly deserted; and the light, railless bridge itself was guarded only by the ten colossal statues of Martian heroes that loomed in war-like attitudes before the beginning of the first aerial span.

The Earthmen were somewhat startled when a living figure, little less gigantic than the carven images, detached itself from their deepening shadows and came forward with mighty strides.

The figure, nearly ten foot in height, was taller by a full yard than the average Aihai, but presented the familiar conformation of massively bulging chest and bony, many-angled limbs. The head was featured with high-flaring ears and pit-like nostrils that narrowed and expanded visibly in the twilight. The eyes were sunken in profound orbits, and were wholly invisible, save for tiny reddish sparks that appeared to burn suspended in the sockets of a skull. According to native customs, this bizarre personage was altogether nude; but a kind of circlet around the neck — a flat wire of curiously beaten silver — indicated that he was the servant of some noble lord.

Haines and Chanler were astounded, for they had never before seen a Martian of such prodigious stature. The apparition, it was plain, desired to intercept them. He paused before them on the pavement of blockless marble. They were even more amazed by the weirdly booming voice,

reverberant as that of some enormous frog, with which he began to address them. In spite of the interminably guttural tone, the heavy slurring of certain vowels and consonants, they realized that the words were those of human language.

“My master summons you,” bellowed the colossus. “Your plight is known to him. He will help you liberally, in return for a certain assistance which you can render him. Come with me.”

“This sounds peremptory,” murmured Haines. “Shall we go? Probably it’s some charitable Aihai prince, who has gotten wind of our reduced circumstances. Wonder what the game is?”

“I suggest that we follow the guide,” said Chanler, eagerly. “His proposition sounds like the first chapter of a thriller.”

“All right,” said Haines, to the towering giant. “Lead us to your master.”

With strides that were moderated to match those of the Earthmen, the colossus led them away from the hero-guarded bridge and into the greenish-purple gloom that had inundated Ignar-Vath. Beyond the pavement, an alley yawned like a high-mouthed cavern between lightless mansions and warehouses whose broad balconies and jutting roofs were almost conterminous in mid-air. The alley was deserted; and the Aihai moved like an overgrown shadow through the dusk and paused shadow-like in a deep and lofty doorway. Halting at his heels, Chanler and Haines were aware of a shrill metallic stridor, made by the opening of the door, which, like all Martian doors, was drawn upward in the manner of a medieval portcullis. Their guide was silhouetted on the saffron light that poured from bosses of radio-active mineral set in the walls and roof of a circular ante-chamber. He preceded them, according to custom: and following, they saw that the room was unoccupied. The door descended behind them without apparent agency or manipulation.

To Chanler, gazing about the windowless chamber, there came the indefinable alarm that is sometimes felt in a closed space. Under the circumstances, there seemed to be no reason to apprehend danger or treachery; but all at once he was filled with a wild longing to escape.

Haines, on his part, was wondering rather perplexedly why the inner door was closed and why the master of the house had not already appeared to receive them. Somehow, the house impressed him as being uninhabited; there was something empty and desolate in the silence that surrounded them.

The Aihai, standing in the center of the bare, unfurnished room, had faced about as if to address the Earthmen. His eyes glowered inscrutably from their deep orbits; his mouth opened, showing double rows of snaggy teeth. But no sound appeared to issue from his moving lips; and the notes that he emitted must have belonged to that scale of overtones, beyond human audition, of which the Martian voice is capable. No doubt the mechanism of the door had been actuated by similar overtones; and now, as if in response, the entire floor of the chamber, wrought of dark, seamless metal, began to descend slowly, as if dropping into a great pit. Haines and Chanler, startled, saw the saffron lights receding above them. They, together with the giant, were going down into shadow and darkness, in a broad circular shaft. There was a ceaseless grating and shrieking of metal, setting their teeth on edge with its insupportable pitch.

Like a narrowing cluster of yellow stars, the lights grew dim and small above them. Still their descent continued; and they could no longer discern each other's faces, or the face of the Aihai, in the ebon blackness through which they fell. Haines and Chanler were beset with a thousand doubts and suspicions, and they began to wonder if they had been somewhat rash in accepting the Aihai's invitation.

“Where are you taking us?” said Haines bluntly. “Does your master live underground?”

“We go to my master,” replied the Martian with cryptic finality. “He awaits you.”

The cluster of lights had become a single star, had dwindled and faded as if in the night of infinity. There was a sense of irredeemable depth, as if they had gone down to the very core of that alien world. The strangeness of their situation filled the Earthmen with increasing disquiet. They had committed themselves to a clueless mystery that began to savor of menace and peril. Nothing was to be learned from their conductor. No retreat was possible — and they were both weaponless.

The strident shrieking of metal slowed and sank to a sullen whine. The Earthmen were dazzled by the ruddy brilliance that broke upon them through a circle of slender pillars that had replaced the walls of the shaft. An instant more, while they went down through the flooding light, and then the floor beneath them became stationary. They saw that it was now part of the floor of a great cavern lit by crimson hemispheres embedded in the roof. The cavern was circular, with passages that ramified from it in every direction, like the spokes of a wheel from the hub. Many Martians, no less gigantic than the guide, were passing swiftly to and fro, as if intent on enigmatic errands. The strange, muted clangors and thunder-like rumblings of hidden machinery throbbed in the air, vibrated in the shaken floor.

“What do you suppose we’ve gotten into?” murmured Chanler. “We must be many miles below the surface. I’ve never heard of anything like this, except in some of the old Aihai myths. This place might be Ravormos, the Martian underworld, where Vulthoom, the evil god, is supposed to lie asleep for a thousand years amid his worshippers.”

The guide had overheard him. "You have come to Ravormos," he boomed portentously. "Vulthoom is awake, and will not sleep again for another thousand years. It is he that has summoned you; and I take you now to the chamber of audience."

Hames and Chanler, dumbfounded beyond measure, followed the Martian from the strange elevator toward one of the ramifying passages.

"There must be some sort of foolery on foot," muttered Haines. "I've heard of Vulthoom, too, but he's a mere superstition, like Satan. The up-to-date Martians don't believe in him nowadays; though I have heard that there is still a sort of devil-cult among the pariahs and low-castes. I'll wager that some noble is trying to stage a revolution against the reigning emperor, Cykor, and has established his quarters underground."

"That sounds reasonable," Chanler agreed. "A revolutionist might call himself Vulthoom: the trick would be true to the Aihai psychology. They have a taste for high-sounding metaphors and fantastic titles."

Both became silent, feeling a sort of awe before the vastness of the cavern-world whose litten corridors reached away on every hand. The surmises they had voiced began to appear inadequate: the improbable was verified, the fabulous had become the factual, and was engulfing them more and more. The far, mysterious clangors, it seemed, were of preternormal origin; the hurrying giants who passed athwart the chamber with unknown burdens conveyed a sense of supernatural activity and enterprise. Haines and Chanler were both tall and stalwart, but the Martians about them were all nine or ten feet in height. Some were closer to eleven feet, and all were muscled in proportion. Their faces bore a look of immense, mummy-like age, incongruous with their agility and vigor.

Haines and Chanler were led along a corridor from whose arched roof the red hemispheres, doubtless formed of artificially radio-active metal,

glared down at intervals like imprisoned suns. Leaping from step to step, they descended a flight of giant stairs, with the Martian striding easily before them. He paused at the open portals of a chamber hewn in the dark and basic adamantine stone. "Enter," Ire said, and withdrew his bulk to let them pass.

The chamber was small but lofty, its roof rising like the interior of spire. Its floor and walls were stained by the bloody violet beams of single hemisphere far up in the narrowing dome. The place was vacant, and furnished only with a curious tripod of black metal, fixed in the center of the floor. The tripod bore an oval block of crystal, and from this block, as if from a frozen pool, a frozen flower lifted, opening petals of smooth, heavy ivory that received a rosy tinge from the strange light. Block, flower, tripod, it seemed, were the parts of a piece of sculpture.

Crossing the threshold, the Earthmen became instantly aware that the throbbing thunders and cave-reverberant clangors had ebbed away in profound silence. It was as if they had entered a sanctuary from which all sound was excluded by a mystic barrier. The portals remained open behind them. Their guide, apparently, had withdrawn. But, somehow, they felt that they were not alone, and it seemed that hidden eyes were peering upon them from the blank walls.

Perturbed and puzzled, they stared at the pale flower, noting thin seven tongue-like petals that curled softly outward from a perforated heart like a small censer. Chanler began to wonder if it were really carving, or an actual flower that had been mineralized through Martian chemistry. Then, startingly, a voice appeared to issue from the blossom: a voice incredibly sweet, clear and sonorous, whose tones, perfectly articulate, were neither those of Aihai nor Earthman.

“I, who speak, am the entity known as Vulthoom,” said the voice “Be not surprised, or frightened: it is my desire to befriend you in return for a consideration which, I hope, you will not find impossible. First of all, however, I must explain certain matters that perplex you

“No doubt you have heard the popular legends concerning me, and have dismissed them as mere superstitions. Like all myths, they are partly true and partly false. I am neither god nor demon, but a being who came to Mars from another universe in former cycles. Though I am not immortal, my span of life is far longer than that of any creature evolved by the worlds of your solar system. I am governed by alien biologic laws, with periods of alternate slumber and wakefulness that involve centuries. It is virtually true, as the Aihais believe, that I sleep for a thousand years and remain conscious continually for another thousand.

“At a time when your ancestors were still the blood-brothers of the ape, I fled from my own world to this intercosmic exile, banished by implacable foes. The Martians say that I fell from heaven like a fiery meteor; and the myth interprets the descent of my ether-ship. I found a matured civilization, immensely inferior, however, to that from which I came.

“The kings and hierarchs of the planet would have driven me away; but I gathered a few adherents, arming them with weapons superior to those of Martian science; and after a great war, I established myself firmly and gained other followers. I did not care to conquer Mars, but withdrew to this cavern-world in which I have dwelt ever since with my adherents. On these, for their faithfulness, I conferred a longevity that is almost equal to my own. To ensure this longevity, I have also given them the gift of a slumber corresponding to mine. They sleep and wake with me.

“We have maintained this order of existence for many ages. Seldom have I meddled in the doings of the surface-dwellers. They, however, have

converted me into an evil god or spirit; though evil, to me, is a word without meaning.

“I am the possessor of many senses and faculties unknown to you or to the Martians. My perceptions, at will, can be extended over large areas of space, or even time. Thus I learned your predicament; and I have called you here with the hope of obtaining your consent to a certain plan. To be brief, I have grown weary of Mars, a senile world that draws near to death; and I wish to establish myself in a younger planet. The Earth would serve my purpose well. Even now, my followers are building the new ether-ship in which I propose to make the voyage.

“I do not wish to repeat the experience of my arrival in Mars by landing among a people ignorant of me and perhaps universally hostile. You, being Earthmen, could prepare many of your fellows for my coming, could gather proselytes to serve me. Your reward — and theirs — would be the elixir of longevity. And I have many other gifts... the precious gems and metals that you prize so highly. Also, there are the flowers, whose perfume is more seductive and persuasive than all else. Inhaling that perfumes, you will deem that even gold is worthless in comparison... and having breathed it, you, and all others of your kind, will serve me gladly.”

The voice ended, leaving a vibration that thrilled the nerves of the listeners for some moments. It was like the cessation of a sweet, bewitching music with overtones of evil scarcely to be detected above the subtle melody. It bemused the senses of Haines and Chanler, lulling their astonishment into a sort of dreamy acceptance of the voice and its declarations.

Chanler made an effort to throw off the enchantment.

“Where are you?” he said. “And how are we to know that you have told us the truth?”

“I am near you,” said the voice, “but I do not choose, at this time to reveal myself. The proof of all that I have stated, however, will be revealed to you in due course. Before you is one of the flowers of which I have spoken. It is not, as you have perhaps surmised, a work of sculpture, but it is an antholite, or fossil blossom, brought, with others of the same kind, from the world to which I am native. Though scentless at ordinary temperatures, it yields a perfume under the application of heat. As to the perfume... you must judge for yourselves.”

The air of the chamber had been neither warm nor cold. Now, the Earthmen were conscious of a change, as if hidden fires had been ignited. The warmth seemed to issue from the metal tripod and the block of crystal, beating upon Haines and Chanler like the radiation of some invisible tropic sun. It became ardent but not insupportable. At the same time, insidiously, the terrestrials began to perceive the perfume, which was like nothing they had ever inhaled. An elusive thread of other-world sweetness, it curled about their nostrils, deepening slowly but acceleratively to a spicy flood, and seeming to mix a pleasant coolness as of foliage-shaded air with the fervent heat.

Chanler was more vividly affected than Haines by the curious hallucinations that followed; though, apart from this differing degree of verisimilitude, their impressions were oddly alike. It seemed to Chanler, all at once, that the perfume was no longer wholly alien to him, but was something that he had remembered from other times and places. He tried to recall the circumstances of this prior familiarity, and his recollections, drawn up as if from the sealed reservoirs of an old existence, took the form of an actual scene that replaced the cavern-chamber about him. Haines was no part of this scene, but had disappeared from his ken, and the roof and walls had vanished, giving place to an open forest of fern-like trees. Their

slim, pearly boles and tender frondage swam in a luminous glory, like an Eden filled with the primal daybreak. The trees were tall, but taller still than they were the flowers that poured down from waving censers of carnal white an overwhelming and voluptuous perfume.

Chanler felt an indescribable ecstasy. It seemed that he had gone back to the fountains of time in the first world, and had drawn into himself inexhaustible life, youth and vigor from the glorious light and fragrance that had steeped his senses to their last nerve.

The ecstasy heightened, and he heard a singing that appeared to emanate from the mouths of the blossoms: a singing as of houris, that turned his blood to a golden philtre-brew. In the delirium of his faculties, the sound was identified with the blossoms' odor. It rose in giddy rapture insuppressible; and he thought that the very flowers soared like flames, and the trees aspired toward them, and he himself was a blown fire that towered with the singing to attain some ultimate pinnacle of delight. The whole world swept upward in a tide of exaltation, and it seemed that the singing turned to articulate sound, and Chanler heard the words, "I am Vulthoom, and thou art mine from the beginning of worlds, and shalt be mine until the end..."

He awoke under circumstances that might almost have been a continuation of the visionary imagery he had beheld under the influence of the perfume. He lay on a bed of short, curling grass the color of verd-antique, with enormous tiger-hued blossoms leaning about him, and a soft brilliance as of amber sunset filling his eyes between the trailing boughs of strange, crimson-fruited trees. Tardily, as he grew cognizant of his surroundings, he realized that the voice of Haines had awakened him, and saw that Haines was sitting near at hand on the curious sward.

“Say, aren’t you ever coming out of it?” Chanler heard the crisp query as if through a film of dreams. His thoughts were bewildered, and his memories were oddly mixed with the pseudo-recollections, drawn as if from other lives, that had risen before him in his delirium. It was hard to disentangle the false from the real; but sanity returned to him by degrees; and with it came a feeling of profound exhaustion and nerve-weariness, which warned him that he had sojourned in the spurious paradise of a potent drug.

“Where are we now? and how did we get here?” he asked.

“As far as I can tell,” returned Haines, “we’re in a sort of underground garden. Some of those big Aihais must have brought us here after we succumbed to the perfume. I resisted the influence longer than you did; and I remember hearing the voice of Vulthoom as I went under. The voice said that he would give us forty-eight hours, terrestrial time, in which to think over his proposition. If we accept, he’ll send us back to Ignarh with a fabulous sum of money — and a supply of those narcotic flowers.”

Chanler was now fully awake. He and Haines proceeded to discuss their situation, but were unable to arrive at any definite conclusion. The whole affair was no less baffling than extraordinary. An unknown entity, naming himself after the Martian Devil, had invited them to become his terrestrial agents or emissaries. Apart from the spreading of a propaganda designed to facilitate his advent on Earth, they were to introduce an alien drug that was no less powerful than morphine, cocaine, or marihuana — and, in all likelihood, no less pernicious.

“What if we refuse?” said Chanler.

“Vulthoom said that it would be impossible to let us return, in that case. But he didn’t specify our fate — merely hinted that it would be unpleasant.”

“Well, Haines, we’ve got to think our way out of this, if we can”

“I’m afraid that thinking won’t help us much. We must be many miles below the surface of Mars and the mechanism of the elevators, in all probability, is something that no Earthman could ever learn.” Before Chanler could offer any comment, one of the giant Aihais appeared among the trees, carrying two of the curious Martian utensils known as *kulpai*. These were large platters of semi-metallic earthenware, fitted with removable cups and rotatory carafes, in which an entire meal of liquids and solids could be served. The Aihai set the platters on the ground before Haines and Chanler, and then waited, immobile and inscrutable. The Earthmen, conscious of a ravening hunger, addressed themselves to the foodstuffs, which had been molded or cut into various geometric forms. Though possibly of synthetic origin, the foods were delicious, and the Earthmen consumed them to the last cone and lozenge, and washed them down with a vinous garnet-colored liquor from the carafes.

When they had finished, their attendant spoke for the first time.

“It is the will of Vulthoom that you should wander throughout Ravormos and behold the wonders of the caverns. You are at liberty to roam alone and unattended; or, if you prefer, I shall serve you as a guide. My name is Ta-Vho-Shai, and I am ready to answer any questions that you ask. Also, you may dismiss me at will.”

Haines and Chanler, after a brief discussion, decided to accept this offer of ciceronage. They followed the Aihai through the garden, whose extent was hard to determine because of the misty amber luminance that filled it as if with radiant atoms, giving the impression of unbounded space. The light, they learned from Ta-Vho-Shai, was emitted by the lofty roof and walls beneath the action of an electromagnetic force of wave-length shorter even than the cosmic rays; and it possessed all the essential qualities of sunlight.

The garden was composed of weird plants and blossoms, many of which were exotic to Mars, and had perhaps been imported from the alien solar system to which Vulthoom was native. Some of the flowers were enormous mats of petals, like a hundred orchids joined into one. There were cruciform trees, hung with fantastically long and variegated leaves that resembled heraldic pennons or scrolls of cryptic writing; and others were branched and fruited in outlandish ways.

Beyond the garden, they entered a world of open passages and chambered caverns, some of which were filled with machinery or with storage-vats and urns. In others, immense ingots of precious and semi-precious metals were piled, and gigantic coffers spilled their flashing gems as if to tempt the Earthmen.

Most of the machines were in action, though intended, and Haines and Chanler were told that they could run in this manner for centuries or millenaries. Their operation was inexplicable even to Haines with his expert knowledge of mechanics. Vulthoom and his people had gone beyond the spectrum, and beyond the audible vibrations of sound, and had compelled the hidden forces of the universe to appear and obey them.

Everywhere there was a loud beating as of metal pulses, a mutter as of prisoned Afrits and servile iron titans. Valves opened and shut with a harsh clangor. There were rooms pillared with strident dynamos; and others where groups of mysteriously levitated spheres were spinning silently, like suns and planets in the void of space.

They climbed a flight of stairs, colossal as the steps of the pyramid of Cheops, to a higher level. Haines, in a dream-like fashion, seemed to remember descending these stairs, and thought they were now nearing the chamber in which he and Chanler had been interviewed by the hidden entity, Vulthoom. He was not sure, however; and Ta-Vho-Shai led them

through a series of vast rooms that appeared to serve the purpose of laboratories. In most of these, there were age-old colossi, bending like alchemists over furnaces that burned with cold fire, and retorts that fumed with queer threads and ropes of vapor. One room was untenanted, and was furnished with no apparatus, other than three great bottles of clear, uncolored glass, taller than a tall man, and having somewhat the form of Roman amphoras. To all appearances the bottles were empty; but they were closed with double-handed stoppers that a human being could scarcely have lifted.

“What are these bottles?” Chanler asked the guide.

“They are the Bottles of Sleep,” said the Aihai, with the solemn and sententious air of a lecturer. “Each of them is filled with a rare, invisible gas. When the time comes for the thousand-year slumber of Vulthoom, the gases are released; and mingling, they pervade the atmosphere of Ravormos, even to the lowest cavern, inducing sleep for a similar period in us who serve Vulthoom. Time no longer exists; and eons are no more than instants for the sleepers; and they awaken only at the hour of Vulthoom’s awakening.”

Haines and Chanler, filled with curiosity, were prompted to ask many questions, but most of these were answered vaguely and ambiguously by Ta-Vho-Shai, who seemed eager to continue his ciceronage through other and ulterior parts of Ravormos. He could tell then nothing about the chemical nature of the gases; and Vulthoom himself, if the veracity of Ta-Vho-Shai could be trusted, was a mystery even to his own followers, most of whom had never beheld him in person.

Ta-Vho-Shai conducted the Earthmen from the room of bottles, and down a long straight cavern, wholly deserted, where a rumbling and pounding as of innumerable engines came to meet them. The sound broke

upon them like a Niagara of evil thunders when they emerged finally in a sort of pillared gallery that surrounded a mile-wide gulf illumined by the terrible flaring of tongued fires that rose incessantly from its depths.

It was as if they looked down into some infernal circle of angry light and tortured shadow. Far beneath, they saw a colossal structure of curved and glittering girders, like the strangely articulated bones of a metal behemoth outstretched along the bottom of the pit. Around it, furnaces belched like the flaming mouths of dragons; tremendous cranes went up and down perpetually with a motion as of long-necked plesiosaurs; and the figures of giants, red as laboring demons, moved through the sinister glare.

“They build the ether-ship in which Vulthoom will voyage to the Earth,” said Ta-Vho-Shai. “When all is ready, the ship will blast its way to the surface by means of atomic disintegrators. The very stone will melt before it like vapor. Ignar-Luth, which lies directly above will be consumed as if the central fires of the planet had broken loose.”

Haines and Chanler, appalled, could offer no rejoinder. More and more they were stunned by the mystery and magnitude, the terror and menace, of this unsuspected cavern-world. Here, they felt, a malign power, armed with untold arcana of science, was plotting some baleful conquest; a doom that might involve the peopled worlds of the system was being incubated in secrecy and darkness. They, it seemed, were helpless to escape and give warning, and their own fate was shadowed by insoluble gloom.

A gust of hot, metallic vapor, mounting from the abyss, burned corrosively in their nostrils as they peered from the gallery’s verge. Ill and giddy, they drew back.

“What lies beyond this gulf?” Chanler inquired, when his sickness had passed.

“This gallery leads to other caverns, little used, which conduct on the dry bed of an ancient underground river. This river-bed, running for many miles, emerges in a sunken desert far below sea-level, and lying to the west of Ignarh.”

The Earthmen started at this information, which seemed to offer them a possible avenue of escape. Both, however, thought it well to dissemble their interest. Pretending fatigue, they asked the Aihai to lead them to some chamber in which they could rest awhile and discuss Vulthoom’s proposition at leisure.

Ta-Vho-Shai, professing himself at their service in all ways, took them to a small room beyond the laboratories. It was a sort of bed-chamber, with two tiers of couches along the walls. These couches, from their length, were evidently designed to accommodate the giant Martians. Here Haines and Chanler were left alone by Ta-Vho-Shai who had tacitly inferred that his presence was no longer needed.

“Well,” said Chanler, “it looks as if there were a chance of escape if we can only reach that river-bed. I took careful note of the corridors we followed on our return from the gallery. It should be easy enough — unless we are being watched without our knowledge.”

“The only trouble is, it’s too easy. But anyway, we can try. Anything would be better than waiting around like this. After what we’ve seen and heard, I’m beginning to believe that Vulthoom really is the Devil — even though he doesn’t claim to be.”

“Those ten-foot Aihais give me the creeps,” said Chanler. “I can readily believe they are a million years old, or thereabouts. Enormous longevity would account for their size and stature. Most animals that survive beyond the normal term of years become gigantic; and it stands to reason that these Martian men would develop in a similar fashion.”

It was a simple matter to retrace their route to the pillared gallery that encircled the great abyss. For most of the distance, they had only to follow a main corridor: and the sound of the rumbling engineering alone would have guided them. They met no one in the passages; and the Aihais that they saw through open portals in laboratory rooms were deeply intent on enigmatic chemistries.

“I don’t like this,” muttered Haines. “It’s too good to be true.”

“I’m not so sure of that. Perhaps it simply hasn’t occurred to Vulthoom and his followers that we might try to escape. After all, we know nothing about their psychology.”

Keeping close to the inner wall, behind the thick pillars, they followed the long, slowly winding gallery on the right hand. It was lit only by the shuddering reflection of the tall flames in the pit below. Moving thus, they were hidden from the view of the laboring giants, if any of these had happened to look upward. Poisonous vapors were blown toward them at intervals, and they felt the hellish heat of the furnaces; and the clangors of welding, the thunder of obscure machineries, beat upon them as they went with reverberations that were like hammer-blows.

By degrees they rounded the gulf, and came at last to its further side, where the gallery curved backward in its return toward the entrance corridor. Here, in the shadows, they discerned the unlit mouth of a large cavern that radiated from the gallery.

This cavern, they surmised, would lead them toward the sunken river-bed of which Ta-Vho-Shai had spoken. Haines, luckily, carried a small pocket-flash, and he turned its ray into the cavern, revealing a straight corridor with numerous minor intersections. Night and silence seemed to swallow them at a gulp, and the clangors of the toiling Titans were quickly and mysteriously muted as they hurried along the empty hall.

The roof of the corridor was fitted with metal hemispheres, now dark and rayless, that had formerly served to illuminate it in the same fashion as the other halls of Ravormos. A fine dust was stirred by the feet of the Earthmen as they fled; and soon the air grew chill and the losing the mild and somewhat humid warmth of the central caverns. It was plain, as Ta-Vho-Shai had told them, that these outer passages were seldom used or visited.

It seemed that they went on for a mile or more in that Tartarean corridor. Then the walls began to straiten, the floor roughened and fell steeply. There were no more cross-passages, and hope quickened in the Earthmen as they saw plainly that they had gone beyond the artificial caverns into a natural tunnel. The tunnel soon widened, and its floor became a series of shelf-formations. By means of these, they descended into a profound abyss that was obviously the river-channel of which Ta-Vho-Shai had told them.

The small flashlight barely sufficed to reveal the full extent of this underground waterway, in which there was no longer even a trickle of its pre-historic flood. The bottom, deeply eroded, and riffled with sharp boulders, was more than a hundred yards wide; and the roof arched into gloom irresoluble. Exploring the bottom tentatively for a little distance, Haines and Chanler determined by its gradual falling the direction in which the stream had flowed. Following this downwards course, they set out resolutely, praying that they would find no impassable barriers, no precipices of former cataracts to impede or prevent their egress in the desert. Apart from the danger of pursuit, they apprehended no other difficulties than these.

The obscure windings of the bottom brought them first to one side and then to the other as they groped along. In places the cavern widened, and they came to far-recessive beaches, terraced, and marked by the ebbing waters. High up on some of the beaches, there were singular formations

resembling a type of mammoth fungi grown in caverns beneath the modern canals. These formations, in the shape of Herculean clubs, arose often to a height of three feet or more. Haines, impressed by their metallic sparkling beneath the light as he flashed it upon them, conceived a curious idea. Though Chanler protested against the delay, he climbed the shelving to examine a group of them more closely, and found, as he had suspected, that they were not living growths, but were petrified and heavily impregnated with minerals. He tried to break one of them loose, but it resisted all his tugging. However, by hammering it with a loose fragment of stone, he succeeded in fracturing the base of the club, and it toppled over with an iron tinkling. The thing was very heavy, with a mace-like swelling at the upper end, and would make a substantial weapon in case of need. He broke off a second club for Chandler; and thus armed, they resumed their flight.

It was impossible to calculate the distance that they covered. The channel turned and twisted, it pitched abruptly in places, and was often broken into ledges that glittered with alien ores or were stained with weirdly brilliant oxides of azure, vermillion and yellow. The men floundered ankle-deep in pits of sable sand, or climbed laboriously over damlike barricades of rusty boulders, huge as piled menhirs. Ever and anon, they found themselves listening feverishly for any sound that would betoken pursuit. But silence brimmed the Cimmerian channel, troubled only by the clatter and crunch of their own footsteps.

At last, with incredulous eyes, they saw before them the dawning of a pale light in the further depths. Arch by dismal arch, like the throat of Avernus lit by nether fires, the enormous cavern became visible. For one exultant moment, they thought that they were nearing the channel mouth; but the light grew with an eery and startling brilliance, like the flaming of furnaces rather than sunshine falling into a cave. Implacable, it crept along

the walls and bottom and dimmed the ineffectual beam of Haines' torch as it fell on the dazzled Earthmen.

Ominous, incomprehensible, the light seemed to watch and threaten. They stood amazed and hesitant, not knowing whether to go on or retreat. Then, from the flaming air, a voice spoke as if in gentle reproof: the sweet, sonorous voice of Vulthoom.

"Go back as you came, O Earthlings. None may leave Ravormos without my knowledge or against my will. Behold! I have sent my Guardians to escort you.

The lit air had been empty to all seeming, and the river-bed was peopled only by the grotesque masses and squat shadows of boulders. Now, with the ceasing of the voice, Haines and Chanler saw before them, at a distance of ten feet, the instant apparition of two creatures that were comparable to nothing in the whole known zoology of Mars or Earth.

They rose from the rocky bottom to the height of giraffes, with shortish legs that were vaguely similar to those of Chinese dragons, and elongated spiral necks like the middle coils of great anacondas. Their heads were triple-faced, and they might have been the trimurti of some infernal world. It seemed that each face was eyeless, with tongue-shapen flames issuing voluminously from deep orbits beneath the slanted brows. Flames also poured in a ceaseless vomit from the gaping gargoyle mouths. From the head of each monster a triple comb of vermilion flared aloft in sharp serrations, glowing terribly; and both of them were bearded with crimson scrolls. Their necks and arching spines were fringed with sword-long blades that diminished into rows of daggers on the tapering tails; and their whole bodies, as well as this fearsome armament, appeared to burn as if they had just issued from a fiery furnace.

A palpable heat emanated from these hellish chimeras, and the Earthmen retreated hastily before the flying splotches, like the blown tatters of a conflagration, that broke loose from their ever-jetting eye-flames and mouth-flames.

“My God These monsters are supernatural !” cried Chanler, shaken and appalled.

Haines, though palpably startled, was inclined to a more orthodox explanation. “There must be some sort of television behind this,” he maintained, “though I can’t imagine how it’s possible to project three-dimensional images, and also create the sensation of heat... I had an idea, somehow, that our escape was being watched.”

He picked up a heavy fragment of metallic stone and heaved it at one of the glowing chimeras. Aimed unerringly, the fragment struck the frontal brow of the monster, and seemed to explode in a shower of sparks at the moment of impact. The creature flared and swelled prodigiously, and a fiery hissing became audible. Haines and Chanler were driven back by a wave of scorching heat; and their wardens followed them pace by pace on the rough bottom. Abandoning all hope of escape, they returned toward Ravormos, dogged by the monsters as they toiled through yielding sand and over the ledges and riffles.

Reaching the point where they had descended into the river-channel they found its upper stretches guarded by two more of these terrific dragons. There was no other recourse than to climb the lofty shelves into the acclivitous tunnel. Weary with their long flight, and enervated by a dull despair, they found themselves again in the outer hall, with two of their guardians now preceding them like an escort of infernal honor. Both were stunned by a realization of the awful and mysterious powers of Vulthoom; and even Haines had become silent, though his brain was still busy with a

futile and desperate probing. Chanler, more sensitive, suffered all the chills and terrors that his literary imagination could inflict upon him under the circumstances.

They came at length to the columned gallery that circled the vast abyss. Midway in this gallery, the chimeras who preceded the Earthmen turned upon them suddenly with a fearsome belching of flames; and, as they paused in their intimidation, the two behind continued to advance toward them with a hissing as of Satanic salamanders. In that narrowing space, the heat was like a furnace-blast, and the columns afforded no shelter. From the gulf below, where the Martian titans toiled perpetually, a stupefying thunder rose to assail them at the same time; and noxious fumes were blown toward them in writhing coils.

“Looks as if they are going to drive us into the gulf,” Haines panted as he sought to draw breath in the fiery air. He and Chanler reeled before the looming monsters, and even as he spoke, two more of these hellish apparitions flamed into being at the gallery’s verge, as if they had risen from the gulf to render impossible that fatal plunge which alone could have offered an escape from the others.

Half swooning, the Earthmen were dimly aware of a change in the menacing chimeras. The flaming bodies dulled and shrank and darkened the heat lessened, the fires died down in the mouths and eye-pits. At the same time, the creatures drew closer, fawning loathsomely, and revealing whitish tongues and eyeballs of jet.

The tongues seemed to divide... they grew paler... they were like flower-petals that Haines and Chanler had seen somewhere. The breath of the chimeras, like a soft gale, was upon the faces of the Earthmen... and the breath was a cool and spicy perfume that they had known before... the narcotic perfume that had overcome them following their audience with the

hidden master of Ravormos... Moment by moment, the monsters turned to prodigious blossoms; the pillars of the gallery became gigantic trees in a glamor of primal dawn; the thunders of the pit were lulled to a far-off sighing as of gentle seas on Edenic shores. 'The teeming terrors of Ravormos, the threat of a shadowy doom, were as things that had never been. Haines and Chanler, oblivious, were lost in the paradise of the unknown drug...

Haines, awakening darkly, found that he lay on the stone floor in the circling colonnade. He was alone, and the fiery chimeras had vanished. The shadows of his opiate swoon were roughly dissipated by the clangors that still mounted from the neighbouring gulf. With growing consternation and horror, he recalled everything that had happened.

He arose giddily to his feet, peering about in the semi-twilight of the gallery for some trace of his companion. The petrified fungus-club that Chanler had carried, as well as his own weapon, were lying where they had fallen from the fingers of the overpowered men. But Chanler was gone; and Haines shouted aloud with no other response than had eerily prolonged echoes of the deep arcade.

Impelled by an urgent feeling that he must find Chanler without delay, he recovered his heavy mace and started along the gallery. It seemed that the weapon could be of little use against the preternatural servants of Vulthoom; but somehow, the metallic weight of the bludgeon reassured him.

Nearing the great corridor that ran to the core of Ravormos, Haines was overjoyed when he saw Chanler coming to meet him. Before he could call out a cheery greeting, he heard Chanler's voice:

"Hello, Bob, this is my first televisual appearance in tridimensional form. Pretty good, isn't it? I'm in the private laboratory of Vulthoom, and Vulthoom has persuaded me to accept his proposition. As soon as you've

made up your mind to do likewise, we'll return to Ignarh with full instructions regarding our terrestrial mission, and funds amounting, to a million dollars each. Think it over, and you'll see that there's nothing else to do. When you've decided to join ins, follow the main corridor through Ravormos, and Ta-Vho-Shai will meet you and bring you into the laboratory."

At the conclusion of this astounding speech, the figure of Chanler, without seeming to wait for any reply from Haines, stepped lightly to the gallery's verge and floated out among the wreathing vapors. There, smiling upon Haines, it vanished like a phantom.

To say that Haines was thunderstruck would be putting it feebly indeed. In all verisimilitude, the figure and voice had been those of the flesh-and-blood Chanler. He felt an eery chill before the thaumaturgy of Vulthoom, which could bring about a projection so veridical as to deceive him in this manner. He was shocked and horrified beyond measure by Chanler's capitulation; but somehow, it did not occur to him that any imposture had been practised.

"That devil has gotten him," thought Haines. "But I'd never have believed it. I didn't think he was that kind of a fellow at all."

Sorrow, anger, bafflement and amazement filled him alternately as he strode along the gallery; nor, as he entered the inner hall, was he able to decide on any clearly effective course of action. To yield, as Chanler had avowedly done, was unthinkably repugnant to him. If he could see Chanler again, perhaps he could persuade him to change his mind and resume an unflinching opposition to the alien entity. It was a degradation, and a treason to humankind, for any Earthman to lend himself to the more than doubtful schemes of Vulthoom. Apart from the projected invasion of Earth, and the spread of the strange, subtle narcotic, there was the ruthless

destruction of Ignar-Luth that would occur when Vulthoom's ether-vessel should blast its way to the planet's surface. It was his duty, and Chanler's, to prevent all this if prevention were humanly possible. Somehow, they — or he alone if necessary — must stem the cavern-incubated menace. Bluntly honest himself, there was no thought of temporizing even for an instant.

Still carrying the mineraloid club, he strode on for several minutes, his brain preoccupied with the dire problem but powerless to arrive at any solution. Through a habit of observation more or less automatic with the veteran space-pilot, he peered through the doorways of the various rooms that he passed, where the cupels and retorts of a foreign chemistry were tended by age-old colossi. Then, without premeditation, he came to the deserted room in which were the three mighty receptacles that Ta-Vho-Shai had called the Bottles of Sleep. He remembered what the Aihai had said concerning their contents.

In a flash of desperate inspiration, Haines boldly entered the room hoping that he was not under the surveillance of Vulthoom at the moment. There was no time for reflection or other delay, if he were to execute the audacious plan that had occurred to him.

Taller than his head, with the swelling contours of great amphoras and seemingly empty, the Bottles glimmered in the still light. Like the phantom of a bulbous giant, he saw his own distorted image in the upward-curving glass as he neared the foremost one.

There was but one thought, one resolution, in his mind. Whatever the cost, he must smash the Bottles, whose released gases would pervade Ravormos and plunge the followers of Vulthoom — if not Vulthoom himself — into a thousand-year term of slumber. He and Chanler, no doubt, would be doomed to share the slumber; and for them, unfortified by the secret elixir of immortality, there would be in all likelihood no awakening.

But under the circumstances it was better so; and, by the sacrifice, a thousand years of grace would be accorded to the two planets. Now was his opportunity, and it seemed improbable that there would ever be another one.

He lifted the petrified fungus-mace, he swung it back in a swift arc, and struck with all his strength at the bellying glass. There was a gong-like clangor, sonorous and prolonged, and radiating cracks appeared from top to bottom of the huge receptacle. At the second blow, it broke inward with a shrill, appalling sound that was almost an articulate shriek, and Haines' face was fanned for an instant by a cool breath, gentle as a woman's sigh.

Holding his breath to avoid the inhalation of the gas, he turned to the next Bottle. It shattered at the first stroke, and again he felt a soft sighing, that followed upon the cleavage.

A voice of thunder seemed to fill the room as he raised his weapon to assail the third Bottle: "Fool! you have doomed yourself and your fellow Earthman by this deed." The last words mingled with the crash of Haines' final stroke. A tomb-like silence followed, and the far-off, muted rumble of engineering seemed to ebb and recede before it. The Earthman stared for a moment at the riven Bottles, and then, dropping the useless remnant of his mace, which had been shattered into several fragments, he fled from the chamber.

Drawn by the noise of breakage, a number of Aihais had appeared in the hall. They were running about in an aimless, unconcerted manner like mummies impelled by a failing galvanism. None of them tried to intercept the Earthman.

Whether the slumber induced by the gases would be slow or swift in its coming, Haines could not surmise. The air of the caverns was unchanged as far as he could tell: there was no odor, no perceptible effect on his breathing. But already, as he ran, he felt a slight drowsiness, and a thin veil

appeared to weave itself on all his senses. It seemed that faint vapors were forming in the corridor, and there was a touch of insubstantiality in the very walls.

His flight was without definite goal or purpose. Like a dreamer in a dream, he felt little surprise when he found himself lifted from the floor and borne along through mid-air in an inexplicable levitation. It was as if he were caught in a rushing stream, or were carried on invisible clouds. The doors of a hundred secret rooms, the mouths of a hundred mysterious halls, flew swiftly past him, and he saw in brief glimpses the colossi that lurched and nodded with the ever-spreading slumber as they went to and fro on strange errands. Then, dimly, he saw that he had entered the high-vaulted room that enshrined the fossil flower on its tripod of crystal and black metal. A door opened in the seamless stone of the further wall as he hurtled toward it. An instant more, while he seemed to fall downward through a nether chamber beyond, among prodigious masses of unnamable machines, upon a revolving disk that droned infernally; then he was deposited on his feet, with the whole chamber righting itself about him, and the disk towering before him. The disk had now ceased to revolve, but the air still throbbed with its hellish vibration. The place was like a mechanical nightmare, but amid its confusion of glittering coils and dynamos, Haines beheld the form of Chanler, lashed upright with metal cords to a rack-like frame. Near him, in a still and standing posture, was the giant Ta-Vho-Shai; and immediately in front of him, there reclined an incredible thing whose further portions and members wound away to an indefinite distance amid the machinery.

Somehow, the thing was like a gigantic plant, with innumerable roots, pale and swollen, that ramified from a bulbular hole. This bole, half hidden from view, was topped with a vermilion cup like a monstrous blossom; and

from the cup there grew an elfin figure, pearly-hued, and formed with exquisite beauty and symmetry; a figure that turned its Lilliputian face toward Haines and spoke in the sounding voice of Vulthoom:

“You have conquered for the time, but I bear no rancor toward you. I blame my own carelessness.”

To Haines, the voice was like a far-off thunder heard by one who is half asleep. With halting effort, lurching as if he were about to fall, he made his way toward Chanler. Wan and haggard, with a look that puzzled Haines dimly, Chanler gazed upon him from the metal frame without speaking.

“I... smashed the Bottles,” Haines heard his own voice with a feeling of drowsy unreality. “It seemed the only thing to do... since you had gone over to Vulthoom.”

“But I hadn’t consented,” Chanler replied slowly. “It was all a deception... to trick you into consenting... And they were torturing me because I wouldn’t give in.” Chanler’s voice trailed away, and it seemed that he could say no more. Subtly, the pain and haggardness began to fade from his features, as if erased by the gradual oncoming of slumber.

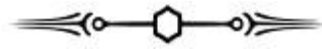
Haines, laboriously trying to comprehend through his own drowsiness, perceived an evil-looking instrument, like a many-pointed metal goad, which drooped from the fingers of Ta-Vho-Shai. From the arc of needle-like tips, there fell a ceaseless torrent of electric sparks. The bosom of Chanler’s shirt had been torn open, and his skin was stippled with tiny blue-black marks from chin to diaphragm — marks that formed a diabolic pattern. Haines felt a vague, unreal horror.

Through the Lethe that closed upon his senses more and more, he became aware that Vulthoom had spoken; and after an interval, it seemed that he understood the meaning of the words. “All my methods of persuasion have failed; but it matters little. I shall yield myself to slumber,

though I could remain awake if I wished, defying the gases through my superior science and vital power. We shall all sleep soundly... and a thousand years are no more than a single night to my followers and me. For you, whose life-term is so brief, they will become — eternity. Soon I shall awaken and resume my plans of conquest... and you, who dared to interfere, will lie beside me then as a little dust... and the dust will be swept away.”

The voice ended, and it seemed that the elfin being began to nod in the monstrous vermilion cup. Haines and Chanler saw each other with growing, wavering dimness, as if through a gray mist that had risen between them. There was silence everywhere, as if the Tartarean engineerings had fallen still, and the titans had ceased their labor, Chanler relaxed on the torture-frame, and his eyelids drooped. Haines tottered, fell, and lay motionless. Ta-Vho-Shai, still clutching his sinister instrument, reposed like a mummied giant. Slumber, like a silent sea, had filled the caverns of Ravormos.

A Star-Change



IT WAS ON Spanish Mountain, where he had climbed from Donner to escape the society of his fellow-campers, that Lemuel Sarkis first met the people of the planet Mlok.

Since he was far from being an expert mountaineer, he had not cared to assail the crowning peaks of the long, somber ridge, but had contented himself with the lower, more accessible eastern terminus. From this, he could look down on the waters of Frog Lake, lying dark and still at the bottom of a bare declivity.

Among volcanic-looking boulders, well out of the wind that swept the upper ridge, he seated himself in morose contemplation while the mountain shadows lengthened, shaken out like lazy wings, and a pale light crept eastward on the waters of black opal below. The vastness of the solitude, its grim and craggy grandeur, began to have a soothing effect upon Sarkis; and the human trivialities and banalities that had driven him to flight assumed their proper insignificance in the mighty perspectives on which he peered.

He had seen no one, not even a shepherd or fisherman, in his climb through the forested ravines and up the sun-flower-covered slopes. He was startled as well as annoyed when a pebble loosened as if by some unheard foot fall clattered past him and went over the precipice. Someone else had climbed the mountain; and his misanthropic aversion rose in a gall-like bitterness as he turned to survey the intruder.

Instead of the tourist or mountaineer he had expected, he saw two beings who bore not even the remotest appearance to humanity, and, moreover, were obviously unrelated to any species of earth-life. Not only for that first

startled moment, but during the entire episode that followed, Sarkis wondered if he had fallen asleep and had been visited by some preposterous dream.

Each of the beings was about four feet high, with a somewhat doubtful division into head and body. Their formation was incredibly flat and two-dimensional; and they seemed to float rather than stand, as if swimming through the air. The upper division, which one accustomed to earthly physical structures would have taken for the head, was much larger than the lower, and more rotund. It resembled the featureless disk of a moonfish, and was fringed with numberless interbranching tendrils or feelers like a floral arabesque.

The lower division suggested a Chinese kite. It was marked with unknown goblin features, some of which may have been eyes, of a peculiarly elongated and oblique sort. It ended in three broad, streamer-like members, subdividing into webby tassels, that trailed on the ground but seemed wholly inadequate for the purpose of legs.

The coloration of these beings baffled Sarkis. He received alternate impressions of opal-shot blackness, elusive greyness and blood-bright violet.

Impossible, beyond belief, they hung before him among the rocks, swaying forward with a dreamy slowness, as if attached to the ground by their tasseled streamers. Their fringes of woven tendrils seemed to float toward him, quivering with restless life, and certain of their eye-like features gradually brightened and drew his gaze with the hypnotic gleaming of crystals.

The feeling of divorce from reality increased upon him; for now he seemed to hear a low, insistent humming, to which he could assign no definite source. It corresponded vaguely with the slow vibration of the

fringes in its beat and cadence. He heard it all around him in the air, like a mesh of sound; and yet somehow it was inside his own brain, as if the unused cells were thrilling with a telepathic murmur from worlds unknown to man.

The humming grew louder, it took an a partial coherence and articulation, as if certain sounds were repeated over and over in a long-drawn sequence. Still more articulate it grew, seeming to form a prolonged vocable. Startlingly it dawned upon him that the vocable was intended for the English phrase, "Come with us," and he realized that the beings were trying earnestly to convey an invitation by means of unearthly vocal organs.

Like one who has been mesmerized, without fear or wonder, he gave himself up to the impressions that besieged his senses. On the flat, vacant, moonfish disks, very gradually, dim, intricate lines and masses limned themselves, growing brighter and more distinct till they began to suggest an actual picture.

Sarkis could comprehend little enough of what he saw; but he received an idea of immense distance and alien, distorted perspective. In a blare of exotic light, a sea-like flood of intense color, strange-angled machineries towered, and structures that might have been either buildings or vegetable growths, receded on a ground of baffling dimension and doubtful inclination. Through this baroque scenery, there floated forms that bore a slight and incoherent resemblance to the beings who confronted him: a resemblance like the broken hint of natural shapes maintained in the utmost perversions of cubism. Together with these forms, as if convoyed by them, there moved another figure having an equally remote and dubious likeness to a human being.

Somehow, Sarkis divined that this latter figure was intended for himself. The scene was a picture of some foreign world or dimension which these

fantastic creatures invited him to visit! Alike in all its details the tableau was duplicated on the disks.

With curious lucidity and coolness, he pondered the invitation. Should he accept it? And if he did accept, what would happen? Of course, it was all a dream — and dreams were tricky things, with a habit of vanishing if one tried consciously to fathom their elusive vistas. But — supposing it were not a dream? From what world, then, had these beings emerged, and by what mode of transit were they enabled to visit the earth? Surely they could not have come from any planet of the solar system: their utter strangeness seemed to argue that they were children of another galaxy, or at least of another sun than ours.

The beings appeared to perceive his hesitation. The pictures on their bodies faded, and were slowly replaced by others, as if they sought to woo him with the varied sceneries of their native world. At the same time, the humming noise resumed ; and after awhile, the equivocal monotone began to suggest familiar words, most of which continued to elude Sarkis. He seemed to make out an eerie prolongation of “offer” and “escape,” as if these vocables were uttered by some enormous, droning insect.

Then, through the strange hypnotic sound, he heard the crisp laughter of a girl and the gay chattering of human voices. Plainly several people had climbed the mountain and were coming toward him along the slope, though he could not see them as yet.

The dreamy charm was broken, and he felt a shock of actual fear as well as deep startlement when he saw that the unknown visitors were still before him. Those intruding human voices had convinced him that the happening was no dream. He felt the involuntary recoil of the earth-born mind from things that are monstrous and inexplicable.

The voices drew nearer behind the rocks, and he thought that he recognized the tones of one or more of his fellow-campers. Then, as he continued to face the apparitions, he discerned above their grotesquely floating forms the sudden flash of sourceless coppery metals that barred the air, hanging aloft like some mechanical mirage. A maze of slanted rods and curving reticulations seemed to hover and descend about the two beings. An instant later, it was gone, and the visitants had also disappeared!

Sarkis hardly saw the approach of a woman and two men, all members of the party he had wished to avoid. To a bewilderment like that of some rudely awakened sleeper, was added the eerie consternation of one who thinks that he has met the supernatural.

A week later, Sarkis had returned to his lodgings in San Francisco and had resumed the tedious commercial art which formed his on reliable source of livelihood. This uncongenial work had involved the ruthless smothering of higher ambitions. He had wanted to paint imaginative pictures, had dreamt of fixing in opulent color a fantasy such as Beardsley had caught in ornate line. But such pictures, it seemed, were in small request.

The happening on Spanish Mountain had stirred his imagination profoundly, though he was still doubtful of its actuality. He gave himself to endless speculation, and often he cursed the untimely interruption that had caused the visitants to vanish.

It seemed to him that the beings (if they were not mere hallucinatory images) had appeared in answer to his own vague and undirected longings for the supermundane. Like envoys from a foreign universe, they had sought him out, had favored him with their invitation. Their attempt at verbal communication argued a knowledge of English; and it was plain that

they could come and go at will, no doubt by means of some occult mechanism.

What did they want with him? he wondered. What would have been his fate if he had accompanied them?

His pictorial bent for the fantastic was deeply stimulated; and more than once, after his daily stint of advertising art was done, he tried to paint the visitants from memory. This he found peculiarly difficult: the images with which he sought to deal were without analogy; and their very hues and proportions baffled his recollection. It was as if an alien spectrum, a trans-Euclidean geometry, had somehow been involved.

One eve, he stood glowering with dissatisfaction before his easel. The picture, he thought, was a silly smudge of over-painted colors which utterly failed to convey the true outlandishness of its theme.

There was no sound or other warning, nothing that could consciously attract his attention. But turning abruptly, he saw behind him the two beings he had met on Spanish Mountain. They swayed slowly in the lamplight between the cluttered table and a somewhat shabby divan, trailing their tasseled members on an old rug whose fading floral designs were splashed with fresh paint.

With the loaded brush in his fingers, Sarkis could only stand and stare, held in the same hypnotic thrall that had swept him beyond fear or wonder on the mountain. Once more he beheld the gradual, somnolent waving or the arabesque feelers; again he heard the dreamy monotonous hum that resolved itself into long drawn vocables, inviting him to go with the visitants. Again, on the moonfish disks, were depicted scenes that would have been the despair of a futurist.

Almost without emotion or thought of any kind, Sarkis gave an audible consent. He hardly knew that he had spoken.

Slowly, as it had begun, the waving motion of the feelers ceased. The consonant humming died, the pictures faded. Then, as before, there came the coppery flash of air-suspended machinery. Broad, oblique rods and concave meshes hovered between ceiling and floor, descended about the alien entities — and about Sarkis himself. Dimly, between the glowing bars, he described the familiar furnishings of his room.

An instant more, and the room vanished like a film of shadow wiped away in light. There was no sense of movement or of transit; but it seemed that a foreign sky had opened above, pouring down a deluge of crimson. Redness streamed upon him, it filled his eyes with a fury as of boiling blood, it dripped over him in sullen or burning cascades.

By degrees, he began to distinguish outlines and masses. The bars and meshes were still around him, his strange companions were still beside him. They were weirdly altered now, and they swam in the crimson flood like the goblin fish of some infernal sea. Involuntarily, Sarkis shrank away from them: they were terrifying, monstrous.

He saw now that he was standing on a curiously tessellated floor that curved upward on all sides like the bottom of a huge saucer. High, outward-sloping walls, windowless and roofless, towered all about. The mechanism that surrounded him was also topless, and he perceived that it was changing. Very slowly, like dying flames, the rods and meshes sank and disappeared in a circle of small sockets that were part of the floor.

A deep vermilion heaven domed the tower, pouring down the thick, heavy light. The material of which the building was composed, whether stone, metal or some unheard-of element, flowed with lusters of liquid ruby and dissolving cinnabar.

Sarkis became aware that the air he breathed, though well-supplied with oxygen, was uncomfortably thick and seemed to choke his lungs. Also,

when he tried to move, he found his weight enormously increased, as if by the gravitation of a gigantic planet.

Where he was or how he had gotten there, he could not imagine. He had nursed an artistic longing for the weird, the otherworldly; but he had never dreamed of this utter and delirious alienation from known things. Moreover, he had not foreseen the shock to human nerves that would ensue an actual transition into another sphere. His sensations of physical discomfort were soon supplemented by a sort of optic torture: the light troubled him, it stimulated his senses cruelly, and yet it stifled and oppressed him at the same time.

A multitude of beings similar to his companions began to enter the topless tower, floating gradually down from the sky or swimming in through low doors. They crowded about him, and he found himself moving toward one of the exits, with their feelers and streamers tugging gently at his limbs. He felt an unreasoning terror at their touch, like a child in the grip of nightmare shadows. Their loud humming awoke in his brain the thought of some hostile horde of abominably droning insects.

Passing through the doorway, he entered a sea of light in which he was unable to discern clearly the features of the landscape. Almost vertically overhead, he saw the blinding blot of a vast sun. The throng of goblin people, increasing momentarily, bore him down a grassless, barren slope whose bottom was lost in the inundating crimson.

More and more, he felt an inexpressible malaise, a frightful mixture of confusion, irritation and depression to which all his senses contributed. He tried to recall the circumstances of his departure from earth, tried to assure himself that there was some natural explanation of all that had happened. The beings whose invitations he had accepted were, he told himself, friendly and well-meaning, and he would suffer no harm. But such thoughts

were powerless to calm his agitated nerves, now subject to the assault of innumerable vibratory forces which the human system had never been meant to sustain.

The torture deepened. His journey down the slope, rendered doubly slow by the dragging gravitational pull and the leisurely drifting of his fantastic entourage, who seemed to obey another and more decelerated tempo of time than man, was literally a descent into hell. Every impression became a source of pain and terror, and he found a lurking menace of evil in all that surrounded him.

At the bottom of the slope, a second roofless bowl-shaped tower loomed from the murk, on the shore of a stagnant sea. To him, at that moment, it was like a shrine of alien diabolism, hateful and menacing and he wanted to scream aloud with a nameless horror when the goblin creatures bore him toward it and urged him through its portals.

The interior of this tower yawning to the red sky, was lined with countless outlandish carvings from floor to top. In the center of the floor, there stood a curious couch, made from a pile of mattress-thick fabrics.

Eyeing the couch with nervous dubiety, Sarkis became aware that the throng had melted away, as if its curiosity were appeased. A mere half-dozen of the beings remained; and since all were equally monstrous, he could not be sure if his original companions were among them.

They gathered around him with their hateful droning, pulling him toward the couch. He resisted, but the tasseled streamers were unbelievably strong, and they tightened about him, clammily repulsive as the tentacles of octopi. The couch was innocent enough, and no doubt the creatures were merely offering him a hospitality which, in their own way, they had tried to accommodate to human needs. But Sarkis felt the terror of a fever patient, whose doctors and attendants seem like hellish torturers.

His last remnant of control gave way, and he shrieked and fought wildly. His own voice assumed an uncanny volume in the thick air, returning upon him deafeningly, surrounding him with ventriloquistic clamors; and he seemed to lift a mountainous load as he struggled.

Very gently but firmly, the creatures laid him on the couch. Fearing he knew not what, he still tried to resist them. Two of the beings proceeded to join their streamers across his recumbent body, interlacing the divided ends like fingers; and two others arranged their members in like fashion across his legs. Floating just above the floor, they held him securely to the couch, like doctors who have tied down a delirious patient.

Lying helpless, he saw the remaining two swim skyward and vanish beyond the tower's rim. After awhile he ceased his futile struggling; but his attendants still held him bound with their flat, clammy streamers.

Sarkis lived in an aching torment, whose duration was not to be measured by earthly time. The red sky appeared to descend upon him, heavier and closer; and the enigmatic details of the sculptures on the tower walls perturbed him with sly suggestions of alien foulness and fear. He saw Satanic faces that leered or frowned obscenely, and faceless gargoyle things that seemed to palpitate with malignant life in the Crimson.

The sky took on an awful, ardent glowing. With intolerable slowness the huge sun, rising to its meridian, filled with its orb the cup that was formed by the tower's rim. The intricate carvings ran with redouble light, the stellar monsters and gargoyles dripped a venomous ruby that maddened the staring eyes of Sarkis, till he closed his lids against it, and still saw in his branded brain the corrosive, inexorably irritant color. Finally a great blackness came upon him: a sluggish and leaden Lethe, through which he sank interminably, still pursued by floating blots of acrid crimson, before losing himself.

He awoke in a sort of stupefaction, drugged and exhausted, as if his nerves had been burnt out by that cruel debauch of red. With nightmare effort, he opened his eyes to a heaven of funereal violet. The red sun had been succeeded by a purple binary of equal magnitude, whose orb was now intersecting the topless tower with a mournfully glaring crescent.

Sarkis could not collect his shattered thoughts; but a shapeless fear, an awareness of something irremediably wrong and baleful, rose in his mind. He was still held by the streamers of his four attendants; and moving his head, he saw that several others were floating patiently beside the couch. With their adroit members, more supple and capacious than hands, they bore a multitude of strange articles.

Seeing that he had awakened, they swam toward him, proffering certain smooth, elongated, fruit-like objects. One of them held to his lips a shallow bowl filled with a semi-viscid liquor, which he was plainly expected to drink.

Utterly astray and unstrung, Sarkis shrank in renewed terror from these beings. Bathed in that lugubrious violet, their outré forms were cadaverous as dead things from another star. An infinite melancholia poured from the purple sun, cascaded from the sloping walls, jetted from the monstrous carvings. The humming of his attendants, who doubtless sought to reassure him, was heavy with a dirge-like horror. Refusing the offered food and drink, he closed his eyes and lay inert beneath the dismal madness that had fallen upon him.

All that followed was as if part of this madness, and not to be separated from its teeming phantasms. Sarkis was lifted from the couch by his attendants, who formed a sort of cradle with their streamers, in which they carried him from the tower and along some endless road. At intervals he

opened his eyes to ghastly-looking plants that swam and swayed in the violet air like sea-weed in an ocean-stream.

Presently he knew that his bearers were descending a steep incline, as if to some deeper circle of this dolorous inferno. Walls that might have been those of a slanted catacomb, lit with a bluish, deathly lambence, stifled him with their closeness.

At length he found himself in a great chamber, whose furnishings, to his distraught eyes, bore the aspect of frightful instruments of torture. Sarkis' alarm was increased when the flat-bodied people stretched him on a slightly hollowed slab of pale mineral whose fittings of machinery at sides and ends were reminiscent of some medieval rack.

A stony fear weighed down his faculties, arrested his breathing; and he did not resist. One of his torturers was floating above him in the hell-blue light, while the others swam in a sort of ring about the slab. The floating creature laid the fringy tips of its middle streamer on his mouth and nostrils, and he felt an odd shock from the contact.

An icy coldness flowed across his face, into his brow and head, into his neck, his arms, his body. It seemed that a strange, benumbing force had been exerted by the creature; the flowing coldness was followed by a loss of all sensation, and a singular detachment from the terror and malaise that had tormented him. Without alarm or speculation, he considered the beings about him, who were now removing his garments and applying to his body the sinister little disks and needle-studded plates that formed part of the slab's mechanical equipment.

It was all meaningless to him; and in some fashion that he did not even try to understand, the whole scene took on an ever-growing dimness and remoteness, as if he were floating away from it — and from himself — into another dimension.

His return to awareness was like a new birth. Strangeness there was, such as an infant would find in its surroundings; but fear and pain were wholly gone. He found nothing monstrous or unnatural or menacing in the world that was now revealed to his senses.

Later, when he had learned to communicate easily with the people of Mlok, they told him of the singular and radical operations which they had deemed it necessary to perform upon him: operations involving his nerves and sense-organs, so as to alleviate, by changing all his impressions and even certain subconscious functions, the torment he had suffered from the images and vibratory rays of a world in which the human senses were not prepared to function properly.

At first they had not understood his sufferings, since they themselves, being far more adaptive than men, endured little discomfort in passing from one world to another. But, having diagnosed his condition, they had hastened to palliate it through the resources of a super-human Science.

Just what had been done to him, Sarkis could never wholly grasp; but the results of the operations, admitted him to an entire new range of perceptions. His other-world hosts had wished to make him hear, see, feel and perceive in much the same manner as themselves.

Perhaps the profoundest change was in his visual images. He saw new colors of supernal softness and beauty. The red daylight, which had almost maddened him, was now a clear and nameless hue which he somehow associated with emerald green. The light of the violet binary no longer depressed him, and its color was remotely allied to pale amber.

His ideas of form had undergone a corresponding alteration. The bodies and members of the alien people, which he had thought almost two dimensional, and which had terrified him with their goblin grotesquery, presented many subtle planes and curves, together with a depth that argued

the addition of at least one totally new dimension. The whole effect was esthetically pleasing, with a fundamental symmetry such as he had previously discerned in well-shaped human bodies. The vegetation, scenery and architecture no longer impressed him abnormal or monstrous.

His sense of time had now become synchronized with the slow tempo of the heavy planet, and the speech and movement of the people had lost that former sense of undue prolongation. The thick air, the weighty gravitation, had also ceased to discomfit him.

Moreover, he had acquired several new senses. One of these can best be described as a combination of hearing and touch: many sound images, especially those of high pitch, were perceived by his tactical nerves as a gently varied tapping. Another sense was that of audible color: certain hues were always accompanied by an overtone of sound, often highly musical.

His intercourse with the people of Mlok was carried on through non-verbal mediums. After the operations, they could impress telepathic words and images upon his mind. Their other modes of communication which involved for them less expenditure of energy than pure telepathy, were mastered more gradually by Sarkis. The reflex of thought-pictures, thrown on their bodies as on a screen, became intelligible to him; and the sound-vibration of their arabesque feelers, which served them in lieu of vocal cords, was now fully articulate, with its higher notes perceivable as a graduated tactile pressure.

He learned that his hosts, who called themselves the Mloki after their planet, were an old and highly developed race for whom the marvels of scientific masterdom had become secondary to the delights of pure perception and reflection. Mlok, they told him, was the third planet of a binary solar system in a galaxy so remote, astronomically speaking, that its light had never reached the earth.

The manner in which they had visited the earth and had taken Sarkis to their own world was indeed strange, and involved the use of an arcanic force, which, by projecting itself through the fifth dimension could exist simultaneously in opposite corners of the universe. The apparatus of coppery-looking bars and meshes which had descended upon Sarkis was composed of this force. How it was controlled and manipulated, he never quite understood, apart from the fact that it was closely obedient to a certain nervous power possessed by the Mlok. They had often visited the earth, as well as many other alien planets, through curiosity. In spite of their divergent sense-development, they had acquired a surprising knowledge of terrene conditions. Two of them, whose names were Nlaa and Nluu, had found Sarkis on Spanish Mountain, and had perceived telepathically his dissatisfaction with mundane life. Being sympathetic in their way, and also curious concerning the result of such an experiment, they had invited him to accompany them in their return to Mlok.

The real events of Sarkis' life among the Mloki were his new and wonderful sensations. The outward happenings were all very simple, for the existence of this people, apart from their excursions to remote worlds, was almost wholly contemplative.

For his food and drink, they supplied him with many fruits and vegetable juices. The Mloki themselves drew their nourishment directly from the air and light; and their topless towers were designed to collect and focus all the solar rays, the absorption of which was to them a rare, epicurean pleasure. To a limited extent, the alteration of Sarkis' nerves had given him a similar faculty; but he still depended mainly on grosser foods.

One very remarkable feature of the sensory change in Sarkis was the vagueness which attended his impressions of his own body. He seemed to

possess a dream-like immateriality, and to drift rather than walk in his movement from place to place.

He spent much of his time in converse with certain of the Mlok especially Nlaa and Nluu, who took a tutelary interest in their protégé, and never wearied of imparting to him their immensely recondite and various knowledge. He acquired undreamt-of conceptions regarding time, space, life, matter and energy, and was also instructed in novel esthetics and in highly complicated arts which made painting appear a silly and barbarous pastime.

How long he remained in Mlok, he never knew. His instructors, a long-lived people to whom centuries were no more than years, gave little importance to the formal measurement of time. But many of the long, double days and brief, irregular nights had gone by, before a homesickness for the lost earth began to torment him. Amid all the beguilements and novelties of his existence, beneath his altered senses, a nostalgia rose in his brain, which was still, at bottom, the brain of an earthman.

The feeling came upon him by degrees. His memories of the world he had formerly detested and from which he had longed to escape, took on a haunting charm and poignancy, and were touched with an enchantment such as belongs to early childhood. He recoiled from the sensory opulence of the world about him, and yearned for the simple scenes and faces of the human sphere.

The Mloki, well aware of the growth of this feeling, tried to distract him with new impressions and took him on a tour of their planet. In this tour, they employed a vessel which swam through the thick air like a submarine in some tellurian ocean. Nlaa and Nluu accompanied the earthman, solicitous, and eager to point out the marvels of each latitude.

The effect however, was merely to aggravate Sarkis' nostalgia. Peering down on the domeless Karnaks and Babylons of this ultra-cosmic world he thought of the earth-cities with a craving which, in view of his former aversion for the works of man, he would never have believed possible. Drifting among prodigious mountains, where mundane peaks would have been lost like boulders, he recalled the Sierras with a sick yearning that moved him almost to tears.

After rounding the equator of Mlok, and visiting the iceless poles, the expedition returned to its starting-point, which lay in the tropic realms Sarkis, now desperately ill and languishing, implored Nlaa and Nluu to send him back by means of the occult force-projector to his own world. They tried to dissuade him, saying that his homesickness was merely a brain-wrought illusion that would wear off in time.

In order to relieve him permanently and speedily from his suffering, they proposed a certain treatment of his brain-cells. By the injection of a rare vegetable serum, they could alter his very memories and mental reactions. These, as well as his sense-impressions, would then approximate those of the Mloki.

Sarkis, though he shrank in a way from the proposed mental transformation, which would have removed him utterly and forever beyond humanity, might well have consented. But certain untoward happenings, wholly unforeseen, were to bring about another eventuation than this.

The planetary system to which Mlok belonged was on the very extreme of its native island universe. In the short intersolar nights, this universe could be seen as a nebulous star-cloud, filling half of the heavens; but the other half was dark and rayless as the Coal Sack familiar to terrene astronomers. It seemed that there were no living stars in the sable gulf,

unless at a distance that had not yet permitted their rays to reach the observatories of Mlok.

Nevertheless, there came from this void the first invasion that had ever threatened the security of the two-sunned planet. The first warning of this invasion was a dark cloud — a thing hitherto unknown in Mlok, whose humid element was constant in the thick seas and heavy air, without evaporation or precipitation. The cloud, which had the form of a trapezium, drew down and widened rapidly above the southern zones, doming the sky with intense ebon. It broke on the lands beneath in a rain of black, liquid globules, which acted like a mordant chemical. Flesh, stone, soil, vegetation, everything that was touched by the rain, dissolved instantly, forming tarry pools and rills that soon merged in an ever-spreading sea.

The news of this catastrophe became known immediately all over the planet. The corrosive sea was watched from air-vessels, and every effort was made to curb its inroads. Dykes of atomic energy were built to enclose it; and belts of elemental fire were centered upon the pollution, to burn it away. But all such measures were in vain: the sea like a liquid cancer, ate steadily into the huge planet.

Some of the black fluid was obtained by Mloki who sacrificed their own lives in submitting it to analysis. Even as the element began its ravages upon their bodies, they announced their findings as to its nature. The globules that had fallen from space, they thought, were protoplasmic organisms of an unknown type, which had the power of liquefying all other forms of matter in what was seemingly an illimitable process of assimilation. This process had formed the eroding sea.

Another rain of globules was soon reported, this time in the northern hemisphere. A third precipitation, following swiftly, made certain then eventual doom of Mlok. The people could only flee from the dissolving

littorals of the three oceans, which were widening in ravenous circles and would sooner or later unite and surround the planet. It became known, also, that the other worlds of the system, which were not peopled by intelligent beings, had been attacked by the lethal organisms.

The Mloki, a philosophic race, long given to equable meditation on cosmic change and death, were resigned to the coining annihilation. Though they could have fled to alien worlds by means of their space projectors, they preferred to perish with their planet.

Nlaa and Nluu, however, as well as their fellows in general, now became anxious for the return of Lemuel Sarkis to his own sphere. It was not just or proper, they argued, that he should share the doom of an ultra-terrene people. They had promptly abandoned the idea of subjecting him to further medical treatment, and could only urge his immediate departure.

In a state of oddly bewildered emotions, he was taken by Nlaa and Nluu to the tower through which he had entered Mlok. From the hill on which this tower stood, he could discern the black arc of the encroaching sea of dissolution on the far horizon.

Enjoined by his preceptors, he took his place amid the circle of floor-sockets that formed the generators of the transporting mechanism. With much regret and sadness, he said farewell to Nlaa and Nluu, after vainly pressing them to accompany him.

Since, as they told him, they could determine by means of their thought-images the very spot in which he was to land, he had expressed a desire to return to Earth via his studio in San Francisco. Moreover, since travel in time was no less feasible than space-transit, his mundane reappearance would occur on the morning that had followed his departure.

Slowly, and having now a different form and hue for his altered eyes, the bars and meshes sprang from the tower floor and surrounded Sarkis. All at

once the air darkened strangely. He turned again toward Nlaa and Nluu for a parting glimpse — and found that they, as well as the tower, had vanished. The transition had already taken place!

The pseudo-metallic rods and meshes began to dissolve about him and he looked for the familiar outlines and furnishings of his studio. A puzzlement assailed him, and then a hideously growing doubt. Surely Nlaa and Nluu had made a mistake, or else the projecting power had failed to return him to his chosen bourn. Seemingly he had been landed in a totally unknown sphere or dimension.

Around him, in a sullen light, he saw the looming of dark, chaotic masses, whose very contours were touched with nightmare menace. Surely this place was not his studio room — these crazily angled cliffs that closed him in were not walls, but the sides of some infernal pit! The dome above, with its dolorously distorted planes, pouring down a hellish glare, was not the skylighted roof that he recalled. The bulging horrors that rose before him along the bottom of the pit, with obscene forms and corrupt hues, were surely not his easel, table and chairs.

He took a single step, and was alarmed by the horrible lightness which he felt. As if by some miscalculation of distance, the step carried him against one of the looming objects, and he ran his hands over it, finding that the thing, whatever it might be, was clammily repulsive to the touch as well as repugnant to sight. Something about it, however, on close inspection, was remotely familiar. The thing was like an over-swollen, geometric travesty of an armchair!

Sarkis felt a nervous perturbation, a vague and all-surrounding terror comparable to that of his first impressions in Mlok. He realized that Nlaa and Nluu had kept their word, and had returned him to his studio; but the realization merely increased his bewilderment. Because of it the profound

sensory changes to which he had been subjected by the Mlok his perceptions of form, light, color and perspective were no longer those of an earthman. Therefore the well-remembered room and its furnishings were wholly monstrous to him. Somehow, in his nostalgia, and the haste and flurry of his departure, he had failed to foresee the inevitability of this change of aspect in all earthly things.

A hideous vertigo swept upon him with the full understanding of his predicament. He was, virtually, in the position of a madman who knows well his own madness, but is utterly without power to control it. Whether or not his new mode of cognition was closer to ultimate reality than the former human mode, he could not know. It mattered little, in the overwhelming sense of estrangement, amid which he sought desperately to recover the least hint or vestige of the world that he remembered.

With the doubtful groping of one who seeks an exit from some formidable maze, he searched for the door, which he had left unlocked on the evening when he accepted the invitation of Nlaa and Nluu. His very sense of direction, he found, had become inverted; the relative nearness and proportion of objects baffled him; but at last, after many stumblings and collisions with the misshapen furniture, he found an insanely faceted projection amid the perverted planes of the wall. This, he somehow determined, was the door-knob.

After repeated effort he opened the door, which seemed to be of unnatural thickness, with convex distortions. Beyond, he saw a yawning cavern with lugubrious arches, which he knew to be the hall of the apartment house in which he lived.

His progress along the hall and down the two flights of stairs to the street-level was like a pilgrimage in some ever-deepening nightmare. The time was early morning, and he met no one. But apart from the maddening

visual distortion of everything about him, he was assailed, as he went on, by a multitude of other sense-impressions that confirmed and increased his neural torture.

He heard the noises of the awakening city, set to an alien tempo of delirious speed and fury: a hurtling of cruel clangors, whose higher notes beat upon him like a pounding of hammers, a volleying of pebbles. The ceaseless impingement stunned him more and more; it seemed that the thronging strokes would batter in his very brain.

He emerged at length on what he knew to be the city street: a broad avenue that ran toward the ferry building. The early traffic had begun and to Sarkis, the passing cars and pedestrians seemed to whirl with lightning speed, like the souls of the damned in some nether chasm of an insane hell. For him, the morning sunlight was a lurid, baleful gloom that flowed in forked rays from a demonian Eye that brooded above the chasm.

The buildings, with pestilent hues and outlines, were full of the terror of delirium, the abomination of ill dreams. The people were ghastly creatures whose headlong movement barely permitted him to form a clear impression of their bulging eyes, their bloated faces and bodies. They terrified him, even as the people of Mlok beneath the maddening vermilion sun.

The air was thin and bodiless to him, and he suffered a peculiar discomfort from the lessened pressure and gravity, which now added to his feeling of hopeless alienation. He seemed to move like a wildered phantom through the dismal Hades to which he had been committed.

He heard the voices of the monsters who went flying past: voices that partook of the same giddy acceleration as their movements, so that the words were indistinguishable. It was like the sound of some vocal record, played too fast on a phonograph.

Sarkis groped his way along the pavement, searching for some familiar landmark in the alien-angled masses of the buildings. Sometimes he thought that he was about to discover a remembered hotel or shop-front — and then, a moment later, the broken similitude was lost in a mad bizarrerie.

He came to an open space, which he had known as a small park, with well-kept trees and shrubbery amid the greening grass. He had been fond of the place, and its memory had often haunted him in his cosmic homesickness. Now, stumbling upon it in that city of delirium, he sought vainly to retrieve the longed-for charm and loveliness.

The trees and shrubs were like towering fungi, loathsome, unclean, and the grass was a vermin-grey foulness from which he turned in sick revulsion.

Astray in that labyrinth of fear, and virtually out of his senses, he fled at random, and tried to cross an arterial where cars were hurtling by at the apparent speed of projectiles. Here, with no warning that his eyes or ears could perceive, something struck him down like a sudden bolt, and he slid into merciful oblivion.

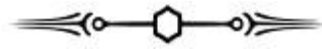
He awoke an hour later in the hospital to which he had been taken. The injuries which he had sustained, from being knocked down by the slowly driven car before which he had thrust himself as if deaf and blind, were not serious, but his general condition puzzled the doctors.

When, with reviving consciousness, he began to scream horribly, and to shrink away as if in mortal terror from his attendants, they were inclined to diagnose the case as delirium tremens. His nerves were obviously in a bad way; though, curiously enough, the doctors failed to detect the presence of alcohol or any known drug to support their diagnosis.

Sarkis failed to respond to the powerful sedatives which they administered. His sufferings, which seemed to take the form of terrific

hallucinations, were prolonged and progressive. One of the interns noted a queer deformation of his eyeballs; and there was much speculation regarding the singular long-drawn slowness of His screams and writhings. However, though baffling, his case was readily enough dismissed by the doctors when, a week later, he persisted in dying. It was merely one more of those unsolved enigmas that sometimes occur even in the best-regulated of professions.

The Primal City



IN THESE AFTER-DAYS, when all things are touched with insoluble doubt, I am not sure of the purpose that had taken us into that little-visited land, I recall, however, that we had found explicit mention, in a volume of which we possessed the one existing copy, of certain vast primordial ruins lying amid the bare plateaus and stark pinnacles of the region. How we had acquired the volume I do not remember: but Sebastian Polder and I had given our youth and manhood to the quest of hidden knowledge; and this book was a compendium of all things that men have forgotten or ignored in their desire to repudiate the inexplicable.

We, being enamoured of mystery, and seeking ever for the clues that material science has disregarded, pondered much upon these pages written in an antique alphabet. The location of the ruins was clearly stated, though in terms of an obsolete geography; and I remember our excitement when we had marked the position on a terrestrial globe. We were consumed by a wild eagerness to visit the alien city. Perhaps we wished to verify a strange and fearful theory which we had formed regarding the nature of the earth's primal inhabitants; perhaps we sought to recover the buried records of a lost science... or perhaps there was some other and darker objective...

I recall nothing of the first stages of our journey, which must have been long and arduous. But I recall distinctly that we travelled for many days amid the bleak, treeless uplands that rose like a many-tiered embankment towards the range of high pyramidal summits guarding the secret city. Our guide was a native of the country, sodden and taciturn, with intelligence little above that of the llamas who carried our supplies. But we had been

assured that he knew the way to the ruins, which had long been forgotten by most of his fellow-countrymen. Rare and scant was the local legendry regarding the place and its builders; and, after many queries, we could add nothing to the knowledge gained from the immemorial volume. The city, it seemed, was nameless; and the region about it was untrodden by man.

Desire and curiosity raged within us like a calenture; and we heeded little the hazards and travails of our journey. Over us stood the eternally vacant heavens, matching the vacant landscape. The route steepened; and above us now was a wilderness of cragged and chasmed rock, where nothing dwelt but the sinister wide-winged condors.

Often we lost sight of certain eminent peaks that had served us for landmarks. But it seemed that our guide knew the way, as if led by an instinct more subtle than memory or intelligence; and at no time did he hesitate. At intervals we came to the broken fragments of a paved road that had formerly traversed the whole of this rugged region: broad cyclopean blocks of gneiss, channelled as if by the storms of cycles older than human history. And in some of the deeper chasms we saw the eroded piers of great bridges that had spanned them in other time. These ruins reassured us; for in the primordial volume there was mention of a highway and of mighty bridges, leading to the fabulous city.

Polder and I were exultant; and yet we both shivered with a curious terror when we tried to read certain inscriptions that were still deeply engraved on the worn stones. No living man, though erudite in all the tongues of Earth, could have deciphered those characters; and perhaps it was their very alienage that frightened us. We had sought diligently during many years for all that transcends the dead level of mortality through age or remoteness or strangeness; we had longed for the elder and darker secrets: but such longing was not incompatible with fear. Better than those who had

walked always in the common paths, we knew the perils that might attend our exorbitant and solitary researches.

Often we had debated, with variously fantastic conjectures, the enigma of the mountain-built city. But towards our journey's end, when the vestiges of that pristine people multiplied around us, we fell into long periods of silence, sharing the taciturnity of our stolid guide. Thoughts came to us that were overly strange for utterance; the chill of elder eons entered our hearts from the ruins — and did not depart.

We toiled on between the desolate rocks and the sterile heavens, breathing an air that became thin and painful to the lungs, as if from some admixture of cosmic ether. At high noon we reached an open pass, and saw before us, at the end of a long and vertiginous perspective, the city that had been described as an unnamed ruin in a volume antedating all other known books.

The place was built on an inner peak of the range, surrounded by snowless summits little sterner and loftier than itself. On one side the peak fell in a thousand-foot precipice from the overhanging ramparts; on another, it was terraced with wild cliffs; but the third side, flung towards us, was no more than a steep and broken acclivity. The rock of the whole mountain was strangely ruinous and black; but the city walls, though equally worn and riven, were conspicuous above it at a distance of leagues, being plainly of megalithic vastness.

Polder and I beheld the bourn of our world-wide search with unvoiced thoughts and emotions. The Indian made no comment, pointing impassively towards the far summit with its crown of ruins. We hurried on, wishing to complete our journey by daylight; and, after plunging into an abysmal valley, we began at mid-afternoon the ascent of the slope towards the city.

It was like climbing amid the overthrown and fire-blasted blocks of a titan citadel. Everywhere the slope was rent into huge, obliquely angled masses, often partly vitrified. Plainly, at some former time, it had been subjected to the action of intense heat; and yet there were no volcanic craters in that vicinity. I felt a vague sense of awe and terror, as I recalled, a passage in the old volume, hinting ambiguously at the fate that had long ago destroyed the city's inhabitants:

‘For the people of that city had reared its walls and towers too high amid the region of the clouds; and the clouds came down in their anger and smote the city with dreadful fires; and thereafter the place was peopled no more by those primal giants who had built it, but had only the clouds for inhabitants and custodians.’

We had left our three llamas at the slope's bottom, merely taking with us provisions for one night. Thus, unhampered, we made fair progress in spite of the ever-varying obstacles offered by the shattered scarps. After a while we came to the hewn steps of a stairway mounting towards the summit; but the steps had been wrought for the feet of colossi, and, in many places, were part of the heaved and tilted ruin; so they did not greatly facilitate our climbing.

The sun was still high above western pass behind us; and I was surprised, as we went on, by a sudden deepening of the charlike blackness on the rocks. Turning, I saw that several greyish vapoury masses, which might have been either clouds or smoke, were drifting about the summits that overlooked the pass; and one of these masses, rearing like a limbless figure, upright and colossal, had interposed itself between us and the sun.

I called the attention of my companions to this phenomenon; for clouds were almost unheard-of amid those arid mountains in summer; and the presence of smoke would have been equally hard to explain. Moreover, the

grey masses were different from any cloud-forms we had ever seen. They possessed a peculiar capacity and sharpness of outline, a baffling suggestion of weight and solidity. Moving sluggishly into the heavens above the pass, they preserved their original contours and their separateness. They seemed to swell and tower, coming towards us on the blue air from which, as yet, no lightest breath of wind had reached us. Floating thus, they maintained the erectness of massive columns or of giants marching on a plain.

I think we all felt an alarm that was none the less urgent for its vagueness. Somehow, from that instant, it seemed that we were penned up by unknown powers and were cut off from all possibility of retreat. All at once, the dim legends of the ancient volume had assumed a menacing reality, We had ventured into a place of hidden peril — and the peril was upon us. In the movement of the clouds there was something alert, deliberate and implacable. Polder spoke with a sort of horror in his voice, uttering the thought that had already occurred to me:

‘They are the sentinels who guard this region — and they have espied us!’

We heard a harsh cry from the Indian, who stood gazing and pointing upwards. Several of the unnatural cloud-shapes had appeared on the summit towards which we were climbing, above the megalithic ruins. Some arose half-hidden by the walls, as if from behind a breast-work; others stood, as it were, on the topmost towers and battlements, bulking in portentous menace, like the cumuli of a thunderstorm.

Then, with terrifying swiftness, many more of the cloud-presences towered from the four quarters, emerging from behind the great peaks or assuming sudden visibility in mid-air. With equal and effortless speed, as if convoked by an unheard command, they gathered in converging lines up the

eyrie-like ruins. We, the climbers, and the whole slope about us and the valley below, were plunged in a twilight cast by the clouds.

The air was still windless, but it weighed upon us as if burdened with the wings of a thousand evil demons. We were overwhelmingly conscious of our exposed position, for we had paused on a wide landing of the mountain-hewn steps. We could have concealed ourselves amid the huge fragments on the slope; but, for the nonce, we were too exhausted to be capable of the simplest movement. The rarity of the air had left us weak and gasping. And the chill of altitude crept into us.

In a close-ranged army, the clouds mustered above and around us. They rose into the very zenith, swelling to insuperable vastness, and darkening like Tartarean gods. The sun had disappeared, leaving no faintest beam to prove that it still hung unfallen and undestroyed in the heavens.

I felt that I was crushed into the very stone by the eyeless regard of that awful assemblage, judging and condemning us. We had, I thought, trespassed upon a region conquered long ago by strange elemental entities and forbidden henceforward to man, We had approached their very citadel; and now we must meet the doom our rashness had invited. Such thoughts, like a black lightning, flared in my brain, even as my logic tried to analyse the reason for the thoughts.

Now, for the first time, I became aware of sound, if the word can be applied to a sensation so anomalous. It was as if the oppression that weighed upon me had become audible; as if palpable thunders poured over and past me. I felt and heard them in every nerve, and they roared through my brain like torrents from the opened floodgates of some tremendous weir in a world of genii.

Downwards upon us, with limbless Atlantean stridings, there swept the cloudy cohorts. Their swiftness was that of mountain-sweeping winds. The

air was riven as if by the tumult of a thousand tempests, was rife with an unmeasured elemental malignity. I recall but partially the events that ensued; but the impression of insufferable darkness, of demonic clamour and trampling, and the pressure of thunderous onset, remains forever indelible. Also, there were voices that called out with the stridour of clarions in a war of gods, uttering ominous syllables, that man's ear could never seize.

Before those vengeful shapes, we could not stand for an instant. We hurled ourselves madly down the shadowed steps of the giant stairs. Polder and the guide were a little ahead of me, and I saw them in that baleful twilight through sheets of sudden rain, on the verge of a deep chasm, which, in our ascent, had compelled us to much circumambulation. I saw them fall together — and yet I swear that they did not fall into the chasm: for one of the clouds was upon them, whirling over them, even as they fell. There was a fusion as of forms beheld in delirium. For an instant the two men were like vapours that swelled and swirled, towering high as the cloud that had covered them; and the cloud itself was a misty Janus, with two heads and bodies, melting into its column...

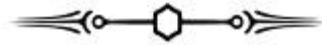
After that I remember nothing more except the sense of vertiginous falling. By some miracle I must have reached the edge of the chasm and flung myself into its depths without being overtaken as the others had been. How I escaped is forevermore an enigma. When I returned to awareness, stars were peering down like chill incurious eyes between black and jagged lips of rock. The air had turned sharp with nightfall in a mountain land. My body ached with a hundred bruises and my right forearm was limp and useless when I tried to raise myself. A dark mist of horror stifled my thoughts. Struggling to my feet with pain-racked effort, I called aloud, though I knew that none would answer me. Then, striking match after

match, I searched the chasm and found myself, as I had expected, alone. Nowhere was there any trace of my companions: they had vanished utterly as clouds vanish

Somehow, by night, with a broken arm, I climbed from the steep fissure. I must have made my way down the frightful mountainside and out of that namelessly haunted and guarded land. I remember that the sky was clear, that the stars were undimmed by any semblance of cloud; and that somewhere in the valley I found one of our llamas, still laden with its stock of provisions.

Plainly I was not pursued by the clouds. Perhaps they were concerned only with the warding of that mysterious primal city from human intrusion. Some day I shall learn their true nature and entity, and the secret of those ruinous walls and crumbling keeps, and the fate of my companions. But still, through my nightly dreams and diurnal visions, the dark shapes move with the tumult and thunder of a thousand storms; my soul is crushed into the earth with the burden of fear, and they pass over me with the speed and vastness of vengeful gods; and I hear their voices calling like clarions in the sky, with ominous, world-shaking syllables that the ear can never seize.

The Disinterment of Venus



PRIOR TO CERTAIN highly deplorable and scandalous events in the year 1550, the vegetable garden of Perigon was situated on the southeast side of the abbey. After these events, it was removed to the northwest side, where it has remained ever since; and the former garden-site was given to weeds and briars which, by strict order of the successive abbots, no one has ever tried to eradicate or curb.

The happenings which compelled this removal of the Benedictines' turnip and carrot patches became a popular tale in Averoigne. It is hard to say how much or how little of the legend is apocryphal.

One April morning, three monks were spading lustily in the garden. Their names were Paul, Pierre and Hughes. The first was a man of ripe years, hale and robust; the second was in his early prime; the third was little more than a boy, and had but recently taken his final vows.

Being moved with an especial ardor, in which the vernal stirring of youthful sap may have played its part, Hughes proceeded to dig the loamy soil even more diligently than his comrades. The ground was almost free of stones, owing to the careful tillage of many generations of monks; but anon, through the muscular zeal with which it was wielded, the spade of Hughes encountered a hard and well-buried object of indeterminate size.

Hughes felt that this obstruction, which in all likelihood was a small boulder, should be removed for the honor of the monastery and the glory of God. Bending busily, he shoveled away the moist, blackish loam in an effort to uncover it. The task was more arduous than he had expected; and the

supposed boulder began to reveal an amazing length and a quite singular formation as he bared it by degrees. Leaving their own toil, Pierre and Paul came to his assistance. Soon, through the zealous endeavors of the three, the nature of the buried object became all too manifest.

In the large pit they had now dug, the monks beheld the grimy head and torso of what was plainly a marble woman or goddess from antique years. The pale stone of shoulders and arms, tinged faintly as if with a living rose, had been scraped clean in places by their shovels; but the face and breasts were still black with heavily caked loam.

The figure stood erect, as if on a hidden pedestal. One arm was raised, caressing with a shapely hand the ripe contour of shoulder and bosom; the other, hanging idly, was still plunged in the earth. Digging deeper, the monks uncovered the full hips and rounded thighs; and finally, taking turns in the pit, whose rim was now higher than their heads, they came to the sunken pedestal, which stood on a pavement of granite.

During the course of their excavations, the Brothers had felt a strange, powerful excitement whose cause they could hardly have explained, but which seemed to arise, like some obscure contagion, from the long-buried arms and bosom of the image. Mingled with a pious horror due to the infamous paganry and nudity of the statue, there was an unacknowledged pleasure which the three would have rebuked in themselves as vile and shameful if they had recognized it.

Fearful of chipping or scratching the marble, they wielded their spades with much chariness; and when the digging was completed and the comely feet were uncovered on their pedestal, Paul, the oldest, standing beside the image in the pit, began to wipe away with a handful of weeds and grass the maculations of dark loam that still clung to its lovely body. This task he

performed with great thoroughness; and he ended by polishing the marble with the hem and sleeves of his black robe.

He and his fellows, who were not without classic learning, now saw that the figure was evidently a statue of Venus, dating no doubt from the Roman occupation of Averaigne, when certain altars to this divinity had been established by the invaders.

The vicissitudes of half-legendary time, the long dark years of inhumation, had harmed the Venus little if at all. The slight mutilation of an ear-tip half hidden by rippling curls, and the partial fracture of a shapely middle toe, merely served to add, if possible, a keener seduction to her languorous beauty.

She was exquisite as the succubi of youthful dreams, but her perfection was touched with inenarrable evil. The lines of the mature figure were fraught with a maddening luxuriousness; the lips of the full, Circean face were half pouting, half smiling with ambiguous allure. It was the masterpiece of an unknown, decadent sculptor; not the noble maternal Venus of heroic times, but the sly and cruelly voluptuous Cytherean of dark orgies, ready for her descent into the Hollow Hill.

A forbidden enchantment, an unhallowed thralldom, seemed to flow from the flesh-pale marble and to weave itself like invisible hair about the hearts of the Brothers. With a sudden, mutual feeling of shame, they recalled their monkhood, and began to debate what should be done with the Venus, which, in a monastery garden, was somewhat misplaced. After brief discussion, Hughes went to report their find to the abbot and await his decision regarding its disposal. In the meanwhile, Paul and Pierre resumed with their garden labors, stealing, perhaps, occasional covert glances at the pagan goddess.

Augustin the abbot came presently into the garden, accompanied by those monks who were not, at that hour, engaged in some special task. With a severe mien, in silence, he proceeded to inspect the statue; and those with him waited reverently, not venturing to speak before their abbot had spoken.

Even the saintly Augustin, however, in spite of his age and rigorous temper, was somewhat discomfited by the peculiar witchery which seemed to emanate from the marble. Of this he gave no sign, and the natural austerity of his demeanour deepened. Curtly he ordered the bringing of ropes, and directed the raising of the Venus from her loamy bed to a standing position on the garden ground beside the hole. In this task, Paul, Pierre and Hughes were assisted by two others.

Many of the monks now pressed forward to examine the figure closely; and several were even prompted to touch it, till rebuked for this unseemly action by their superior. Certain of the elder and more austere Benedictines urged its immediate destruction, arguing that the image was a heathen abomination that defiled the abbey garden by its presence. Others, the most practical, pointed out that the Venus, being a rare and beautiful example of Roman sculpture, might well be sold at a goodly price to some rich and impious art-lover.

Augustin, though he felt that the Venus should be destroyed as an impure pagan idol, was filled with a queer and peculiar hesitation which led him to defer the necessary orders for her demolition. It was as if the subtly wanton loveliness of the marble were pleading for clemency like a living form, with a voice half human, half divine. Averting his eyes from the white bosom, he spoke harshly, bidding the Brothers to return to their labors and devotions, and saying that the Venus could remain in the garden till arrangements were made for her ultimate disposition and removal. Pending

this, he instructed one of the Brothers to bring sackcloth and drape therewith the unseemly nudity of the goddess.

The disinterment of this antique image became a source of much discussion and some perturbation and dissension amid the quiet Brotherhood at Perigon. Because of the curiosity shown by many monks, the abbot issued an injunction that no one should approach the statue, other than those whose labors might compel an involuntary proximity. He himself, at that time, was criticized by some of the deans for his laxness in not destroying the Venus immediately. During the few years that remained to him, he was to regret bitterly the remissness he had shown in this matter.

No one, however, dreamt of the grave scandals that were to ensue shortly. But, on the day following the discovery of the statue, it became manifest that some evil and disturbing influence was abroad. Heretofore, breaches of discipline had been rare among the Brothers; and cardinal offenses were quite unknown; but now it seemed that a spirit of unruliness, impiety, ribaldry and wrong-doing had entered Perigon.

Paul, Pierre and Hughes were the first to undergo penance for their peccancies. A shocked dean had overheard them discussing with impure levity, certain matters that were more suitable for the conversation of worldly gallants than of monks. By way of extenuation, the three Brothers pleaded that they had been obsessed with carnal thoughts and images ever since their exhumation of the Venus; and for this they blamed the statue, saying that a pagan witchcraft had come upon them from its flesh-white marble.

On that same day, others of the monks were charged with similar offenses; and still others made confession of lubric desires and visions such as had tormented Anthony during his desert vigil. Those, too, were prone to blame the Venus. Before evensong, many infractions of monastic rule were

reported; and some of them were of such nature as to call for the severest rebuke and penance. Brothers whose conduct had heretofore been exemplary in all ways were found guilty of transgressions such as could be accounted for only by the direct influence of Satan or some powerful demon.

Worst of all, on that very night, it was found that Hughes and Paul were absent from their beds in the dormitory; and no one could say whither they had gone. They did not return on the day following. Inquiries were made by the abbot's order in the neighboring village of Sainte Zenobie, and it was learned that Paul and Hughes had spent the night at a tavern of unsavory repute, drinking and wenching; and they had taken the road to Vyones, chief city of the province, at early dawn. Later, they were apprehended and brought back to the monastery, protesting that their downfall was wholly due to some evil contagion which they had incurred by touching the statue.

In view of the unexampled demoralization which prevailed at Perigon, no one doubted that a diabolic pagan charm was at work. The source of the charm was all too obvious. Moreover, queer tales were told by monks who had labored in the garden or had passed within sight of the image. They swore that the Venus was no mere sculptured idol but a living woman or she-devil who had changed her position repeatedly and had rearranged the folds of the sackcloth in such manner as to lay bare one shapely shoulder and a part of her bosom. Others avowed that the Venus walked in the garden by night; and some even affirmed that she had entered the monastery and appeared before them like a succubus.

Much fright and horror was created by these tales, and no one dared to approach the image closely. Though the situation was supremely scandalous, the abbot still forbore to issue orders for the statue's demolition, fearing that any monk who touched it, even with a motive so pious, would

court the baleful sorcery that had brought Hughes and Paul to disaster and disgrace, and had led others into impurity of speech or actual impiety.

It was suggested, however, that some laymen should be hired to shatter the idol and remove and bury its fragments. This, no doubt, would have been accomplished in good time, if it had not been for the hasty and fanatic zeal of Brother Louis.

3

This Brother, a youth of good family, was conspicuous among the Benedictines both for his comely face and his austere piety. Handsome as Adonis, he was given to ascetic vigils and prolonged devotions, outdoing in this regard the abbot and the deans.

At the hour of the statue's disinterment, he was busily engaged in copying a Latin testament; and neither then nor at any later time had he cared to inspect a find which he considered more than dubious. He had expressed disapprobation on hearing from his fellows the details of the discovery; and feeling that the abbey garden was polluted by the presence of an obscene image, he had purposely avoided all windows through which the marble might have been visible to his chaste eyes.

When the influence of heathen evil and corruption became manifest amid the Brothers, he had shown great indignation, deeming it a most insufferable thing that virtuous, God-fearing monks should be brought to shame through the operation of some hellish pagan spell. He had reprobated openly the hesitation of Augustin and his delay in destroying the maleficent idol. More mischief, he said, would ensue if it were left intact.

In view of all this, extreme surprize and alarm were felt at Perigon when, on the fourth day after the exhumation of the statue, Brother Louis was discovered missing. His bed had not been occupied on the previous night;

but it seemed impossible that he could have fled the monastery, yielding to such desires and impulses as had caused the ruin of Paul and Hughes.

The monks were strictly interrogated by their abbot, and it was revealed that Brother Louis, when last seen, had been loitering about the abbey workshop. Since, formerly, he had shown small interest in tools or manual labor, this was deemed a peculiar thing. Forthwith a visit was made to the workshop; and the monk in charge of the smithy soon found that one of his heaviest hammers had been removed.

The conclusion was obvious to all: Louis, impelled by virtuous ardor and holy wrath, had gone forth during the night to demolish the baleful image of Venus.

Augustin and the Brothers who were with him repaired immediately to the garden. There they were met by the gardeners, who, noticing from afar that the image no longer occupied its position beside the pit, were hurrying to report this matter to the abbot. They had not dared to investigate the mystery of its disappearance, believing firmly that the statue had come to life and was lurking somewhere about the garden.

Made bold by their number and by the leadership of Augustin, the assembled monks approached the pit. Beside its rim they beheld the missing hammer, lying on the clodded loam as if Louis had cast it aside. Near by was the sacking that had clothed the image; but there were no fragments of broken marble such as they had thought to see. The footprints of Louis were clearly imprinted upon the pit's margin, and were discernible in strangely close proximity to the mark left by the pedestal of the statue.

All this was very peculiar, and the monks felt that the mystery had begun to assume a more than sinister tinge. Then, peering into the hole itself, they beheld a thing that was explicable only through the machinations of Satan — or one of Satan's most pernicious and seductive she-demons.

Somehow, the Venus had been overturned and had fallen back into the broad deep pit. The body of Brother Louis, with a shattered skull and lips bruised to a sanguine pulp, was lying crushed beneath her marble breasts. His arms were clasped about her in a desperate, lover-like embrace, to which death had now added its own rigidity. Even more horrible and inexplicable, however, was the fact that the stone arms of the Venus had changed their posture and were now folded closely about the dead monk as if she had been sculptured in the attitude of an amorous enlacement!

The horror and consternation felt by the Benedictines were inexpressible. Some would have fled from the spot in panic, after viewing this frightful and most abominable prodigy; but Augustin restrained them, his features stern with the religious ire of one who beholds the fresh handiwork of the Adversary. He commanded the bringing of a cross, an aspergillus and holy water, together with a ladder for use in descending into the pit; saying that the body of Louis must be redeemed from the baleful and dolorous plight into which it had fallen. The iron hammer, lying beside the hole, was proof of the righteous intention with which Louis had gone forth; but it was all too plain that he had succumbed to the hellish charms of the statue. Nevertheless, the Church could not abandon its erring servant to the powers of Evil.

When the ladder was brought, Augustin himself led the descent, followed by three of the stoutest and most courageous Brothers, who were willing to risk their own spiritual safety for the redemption of Louis. Regarding that which ensued, the legends vary slightly. Some say that the aspersions of holy water, made by Augustin on the statue and its victim, were without palpable effect; while others relate that the drops turned to infernal steam when they struck the recumbent Venus, and blackened the flesh of Louis like that of a month-old cadaver, thus proving him wholly

claimed by perdition. But the tales agree in this, that the strength of the three stout Brothers, laboring in unison at their abbot's direction, was impotent to loosen the marble clasp of the goddess from about her prey.

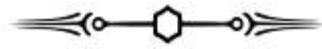
So, by the order of Augustin, the pit was filled hastily to its rim with earth and stones; and the very spot where it had been, being left without mound or other mark, was quickly overgrown by grass and weeds along with the rest of the abandoned garden.

The Colossus of Ylourgne

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1. The Flight of the Necromancer



THE THRICE-INFAMOUS NATHAIRE, alchemist, astrologer and necromancer, with his ten devil-given pupils, had departed very suddenly and under circumstances of strict secrecy from the town of Vyones. It was widely thought, among the people of that vicinage, that his departure had been prompted by a salutary fear of ecclesiastical thumbscrews and faggots. Other wizards, less notorious than he, had already gone to the stake during a year of unusual inquisitory zeal; and it was well-known that Nathaire had incurred the reprobation of the Church. Few, therefore, considered the reason of his going a mystery; but the means of transit which he had employed, as well as the destination of the sorcerer and his pupils, were regarded as more than problematic.

A thousand dark and superstitious rumours were abroad; and passers made the sign of the Cross when they neared the tall, gloomy house which Nathaire had built in blasphemous proximity to the great cathedral and had filled with a furniture of Satanic luxury and strangeness. Two daring thieves, who had entered the mansion when the fact of its desertion became well established, reported that much of this furniture, as well as the books and other paraphernalia of Nathaire, had seemingly departed with its owner, doubtless to the same fiery bourn. This served to augment the unholy mystery: for it was patently impossible that Nathaire and his ten apprentices, with several cart-loads of household belongings, could have passed the everguarded city gates in any legitimate manner without the knowledge of the custodians.

It was said by the more devout and religious moiety that the Archfiend, with a legion of bat-winged assistants, had borne them away bodily at moonless midnight. There were clerics, and also reputable burghers, who professed to have seen the flight of man-like shapes upon the blotted stars together with others that were not men, and to have heard the wailing cries of the hell-bound crew as they passed in an evil cloud over the roofs and city walls.

Others believed that the sorcerers had transported themselves from Vyones through their own diabolic arts, and had withdrawn to some unfrequented fastness where Nathaire, who had long been in feeble health, could hope to die in such peace and serenity as might be enjoyed by one who stood between the flames of the auto-da-fé and those of Abaddon. It was thought that he had lately cast his own horoscope, for the first time in his fifty-odd years, and had read therein an impending conjunction of disastrous planets, signifying early death.

Others still, among whom were certain rival astrologers and enchanters, said that Nathaire had retired from the public view merely that he might commune without interruption with various coadjutive demons; and thus might weave, unmolested, the black spells of a supreme and lycanthropic malice. These spells, they hinted, would in due time be visited upon Vyones and perhaps upon the entire region of Averroigne; and would no doubt take the form of a fearsome pestilence, or a wholesale invultuation, or a realm-wide incursion of succubi and incubi.

Amid the seething of strange rumours, many half-forgotten tales were recalled, and new legends were created overnight. Much was made of the obscure nativity of Nathaire and his dubitable wanderings before he had settled, six years previous, in Vyones. People said that he was fiend-begotten, like the fabled Merlin: his father being no less a personage than

Alastor, demon of revenge; and his mother a deformed and dwarfish sorceress. From the former, he had taken his spitefulness and malignity; from the latter, his squat, puny physique.

He had travelled in Orient lands, and had learned from Egyptian or Saracenic masters the unhallowed art of necromancy, in whose practice he was unrivalled. There were black whispers anent the use he had made of long-dead bodies, of fleshless bones, and the service he had wrung from buried men that the angel of doom alone could lawfully raise up. He had never been popular, though many had sought his advice and assistance in the furthering of their own more or less dubious affairs. Once, in the third year after his coming to Vyones, he had been stoned in public because of his bruited necromancies, and had been permanently lamed by a well-directed cobble. This injury, it was thought, he had never forgiven; and he was said to return the antagonism of the clergy with the hellish hatred of an Antichrist.

Apart from the sorcerous evils and abuses of which he was commonly suspected, he had long been looked upon as a corrupter of youth. Despite his minikin stature, his deformity and ugliness, he possessed a remarkable power, a mesmeric persuasion; and his pupils, whom he was said to have plunged into bottomless and ghoulish iniquities, were young men of the most brilliant promise. On the whole, his vanishment was regarded as a quite providential riddance.

Among the people of the city there was one man who took no part in the sombre gossip and lurid speculation. This man was Gaspard du Nord, himself a student of the proscribed sciences, who had been numbered for a year among the pupils of Nathaire but had chosen to withdraw quietly from the master's household after learning the enormities that would attend his further initiation. He had, however, taken with him much rare and peculiar

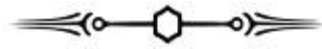
knowledge, together with a certain insight into the baleful powers and night-dark motives of the necromancer.

Because of this knowledge and insight, Gaspard preferred to remain silent when he heard of Nathaire's departure. Also, he did not think it well to revive the memory of his own past pupilage. Alone with his books, in a sparsely furnished attic, he frowned above a small, oblong mirror, framed with an arabesque of golden vipers, that had once been the property of Nathaire.

It was not the reflection of his own comely and youthful though subtly lined face that caused him to frown. Indeed, the mirror was of another kind than that which reflects the features of the gazer. In its depths, for a few instants, he had beheld a strange and ominous-looking scene, whose participants were known to him but whose location he could not recognize or orientate. Before he could study it closely, the mirror had clouded as if with the rising of alchemic fumes, and he had seen no more.

This clouding, he reflected, could mean only one thing: Nathaire had known himself watched and had put forth a counterspell that rendered the clairvoyant mirror useless. It was the realization of this fact, together with the brief, sinister glimpse of Nathaire's present activities, that troubled Gaspard and caused a chill horror to mount slowly in his mind: a horror that had not yet found a palpable form or a name.

2. The Gathering of the Dead



THE DEPARTURE OF Nathaire and his pupils occurred in the late spring of 1281, during the interlunar dark. Afterwards a new moon waxed above the flowery fields and bright-leafed woods and waned in ghostly silver. With its waning, people began to talk of other magicians and fresher mysteries.

Then, in the moon-deserted nights of early summer, there came a series of disappearances far more unnatural and inexplicable than that of the dwarfish, malignant sorcerer.

It was found one day, by grave-diggers who had gone early to their toil in a cemetery outside the walls of Vyones, that no less than six newly occupied graves had been opened, and the bodies, which were those of reputable citizens, removed. On closer examination, it became all too evident that this removal had not been effected by robbers. The coffins, which lay aslant or stood protruding upright from the mould, offered all the appearance of having been shattered from within as if by the use of extrahuman strength; and the fresh earth itself was upheaved, as if the dead men, in some awful, untimely resurrection, had actually dug their way to the surface.

The corpses had vanished utterly, as if hell had swallowed them; and, as far as could be learned, there were no eyewitnesses of their fate. In those devil-ridden times, only one explanation of the happening seemed credible: demons had entered the graves and had taken bodily possession of the dead, compelling them to arise and go forth.

To the dismay and horror of all Averaigne, the strange vanishment was followed with appalling promptness by many others of a like sort. It seemed

as if an occult, resistless summons had been laid upon the dead. Nightly, for a period of two weeks, the cemeteries of Vyonnes and also those of other towns, of villages and hamlets, gave up a ghastly quota of their tenants. From brazen bolted tombs, from common charnels, from shallow, unconsecrated trenches, from the marble lidded vaults of churches and cathedrals, the weird exodus went on without cessation.

Worse than this, if possible, there were newly ceremented corpses that leapt from their biers or catafalques, and disregarding the horrified watchers, ran with great bounds of automatic frenzy into the night, never to be seen again by those who lamented them.

In every case, the missing bodies were those of young stalwart men who had died but recently and had met their death through violence or accident rather than wasting illness. Some were criminals who had paid the penalty of their misdeeds; others were men-at-arms or constables, slain in the execution of their duty. Knights who had died in tourney or personal combat were numbered among them; and many were the victims of the robber bands who infested Averroigne at that time. There were monks, merchants, nobles, yeomen, pages, priests; but none, in any case, who had passed the prime of life. The old and infirm, it seemed, were safe from the animating demons.

The situation was looked upon by the more superstitious as a veritable omening of the world's end. Satan was making war with his cohorts and was carrying the bodies of the holy dead into hellish captivity. The consternation increased a hundredfold when it became plain that even the most liberal sprinkling of holy water, the performance of the most awful and cogent exorcisms, failed utterly to give protection against this diabolic ravishment. The Church owned itself powerless to cope with the strange

evil; and the forces of secular law could do nothing to arraign or punish the intangible agency.

Because of the universal fear that prevailed, no effort was made to follow the missing cadavers. Ghastly tales, however, were told by late wayfarers who had met certain of these liches, striding alone or in companies along the roads of Averoigne. They gave the appearance of being deaf, dumb, totally insensate, and of hurrying with horrible speed and sureness towards a remote, predestined goal. The general direction of their flight, it seemed, was eastward; but only with the cessation of the exodus, which had numbered several hundred people, did any one begin to suspect the actual destination of the dead.

This destination, it somehow became rumoured, was the ruinous castle of Ylourgne, beyond the werewolf-haunted forest, in the outlying, semi-mountainous hills of Averoigne.

Ylourgne, a great, craggy pile that had been built by a line of evil and marauding barons now extinct, was a place that even the goatherds preferred to shun. The wrathful spectres of its bloody lords were said to move turbulently in its crumbling halls; and its chatelaines were the Undead. No one cared to dwell in the shadow of its cliff-founded walls; and the nearest abode of living men was a small Cistercian monastery, more than a mile away on the opposite slope of the valley.

The monks of this austere brotherhood held little commerce with the world beyond the hills; and few were the visitors who sought admission at their high-perched portals. But, during that dreadful summer, following the disappearances of the dead, a weird and disquieting tale went forth from the monastery throughout Averoigne.

Beginning with late spring, the Cistercian monks were compelled to take cognizance of sundry odd phenomena in the old, long-deserted ruins of

Ylourgne, which were visible from their windows. They had beheld flaring lights, where lights should not have been: flames of uncanny blue and crimson that shuddered behind the broken, weed-grown embrasures or rose starwards above the jagged crenelations. Hideous noises had issued from the ruin by night together with the flames; and the monks had heard a clangour as of hellish anvils and hammers, a ringing of gigantic armour and maces, and had deemed that Ylourgne was become a mustering-ground of devils. Mephitic odours as of brimstone and burning flesh had floated across the valley; and even by day, when the noises were silent and the lights no longer flared, a thin haze of hell-blue vapour hung upon the battlements. It was plain, the monks thought, that the place had been occupied from beneath by subterrestrial beings; for no one was seen to approach it by way of the bare, open slopes and crags. Observing these signs of the Archfoe's activity in their neighbourhood, they crossed themselves with new fervour and frequency, and said their Paters and Aves more interminably than before. Their toil and austerities, also, they redoubled. Otherwise, since the old castle was a place abandoned by men, they took no heed of the supposed occupation, deeming it well to mind their own affairs unless in case of overt Satanic hostility.

They kept a careful watch; but for several weeks they saw no one who actually entered Ylourgne or emerged therefrom. Except for the nocturnal lights and noises, and the hovering vapour by day, there was no proof of tenantry either human or diabolic. Then, one morning, in the valley below the terraced gardens of the monastery, two brothers, hoeing weeds in a carrot-patch, beheld the passing of a singular train of people who came from the direction of the great forest of Averoine and went upwards climbing the steep, chasmy slope towards Ylourgne.

These people, the monks averred, were striding along in great haste, with stiff but flying steps; and all were strangely pale of feature and were habited in the garments of the grave. The shrouds of some were torn and ragged; and all were dusty with travel or grimed with the mould of interment. The people numbered a dozen or more; and after them, at intervals, there came several stragglers, attired like the rest. With marvellous agility and speed, they mounted the hill and disappeared at length amid the lowering walls of Ylourgne.

At this time, no rumour of the ravished graves and biers had reached the Cistercians. The tale was brought to them later, after they had beheld, on many successive mornings, the passing of small or great companies of the dead towards the devil-taken castle. Hundreds of these liches, they swore, had filed by beneath the monastery; and doubtless many others had gone past unnoted in the dark. None, however, were seen to come forth from Ylourgne, which had swallowed them up like the undisgorging Pit.

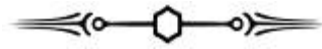
Though direly frightened and sorely scandalized, the brothers still thought it well to refrain from action. Some, the hardiest, irked by all these flagrant signs of evil, had desired to visit the ruins with holy water and lifted crucifixes. But their abbot, in his wisdom, enjoined them to wait. In the meanwhile, the nocturnal flames grew brighter, the noises louder.

Also, in the course of this waiting, while incessant prayers went up from the little monastery, a frightful thing occurred. One of the brothers, a stout fellow named Theophile, in violation of the rigorous discipline, had made over-frequent visits to the wine-casks. No doubt he had tried to drown his pious horror at these untoward happenings, At any rate, after his potations, he had the ill-luck to wander out among the precipices and break his neck.

Sorrowing for his death and dereliction, the brothers laid Theophile in the chapel and chanted their masses for his soul. These masses, in the dark

hours before morning, were interrupted by the untimely resurrection of the dead monk, who, with his head lolling horribly on his broken neck, rushed as if fiend-ridden from the chapel and ran down the hill towards the demon flames and clamours of Ylourgne.

3. The Testimony of the Monks



FOLLOWING THE ABOVE-RELATED occurrence, two of the brothers who had previously desired to visit the haunted castle again applied to the abbot for this permission, saying that God would surely aid them in avenging the abduction of Theophile's body as well as the taking of many others from consecrated ground. Marvelling at the hardihood of these lusty monks, who proposed to beard the Arch-enemy in his lair, the abbot permitted them to go forth, furnished with aspergilluses and flasks of holy water, and bearing great crosses of hornbeam, such as would have served for maces with which to brain an armoured knight.

The monks, whose names were Bernard and Stephane, went boldly up at middle forenoon to assail the evil stronghold. It was an arduous climb, among overhanging boulders and along slippery scarps; but both were stout and agile, and, moreover, well accustomed to such climbing. Since the day was sultry and airless, their white robes were soon stained with sweat; but pausing only for brief prayer, they pressed on; and in good season they neared the castle, upon whose grey, time-eroded ramparts they could still descry no evidence of occupation or activity.

The deep moat that had once surrounded the place was now dry, and had been partly filled by crumbling earth and detritus from the walls. The drawbridge had rotted away; but the blocks of the barbican, collapsing into the moat, had made a sort of rough causey on which it was possible to cross. Not without trepidation, and lifting their crucifixes as warriors lift their weapons in the escalade of an armed fortress, the brothers climbed over the ruin of the barbican into the courtyard.

This too, like the battlements, was seemingly deserted. Overgrown nettles, rank grasses and sapling trees were rooted between its paving-stones. The high, massive donjon, the chapel, and that portion of the castellated structure containing the great hall, had preserved their main outlines after centuries of dilapidation. To the left of the broad bailey, a doorway yawned like the mouth of a dark cavern in the cliffy mass of the hall-building; and from this doorway there issued a thin, bluish vapour, writhing in phantom coils towards the unclouded heavens.

Approaching the doorway, the brothers beheld a gleaming of red fires within, like the eyes of dragons blinking through infernal murk. They felt sure that the place was an outpost of Erebus, an ante-chamber of the Pit; but nevertheless, they entered bravely, chanting loud exorcisms and brandishing their mighty crosses of hornbeam.

Passing through the cavernous doorway, they could see but indistinctly in the gloom, being somewhat blinded by the summer sunlight they had left. Then, with the gradual clearing of their vision, a monstrous scene was limned before them, with evergrowing details of crowding horror and grotesquery. Some of the details were obscure and mysteriously terrifying; others, all too plain, were branded as if with sudden, ineffaceable hell-fire on the minds of the monks.

They stood on the threshold of a colossal chamber, which seemed to have been made by the tearing down of upper floors and inner partitions adjacent to the castle hall, itself a room of huge extent. The chamber seemed to recede through interminable shadow, shafted with sunlight falling through the rents of ruin: sunlight that was powerless to dissipate the infernal gloom and mystery.

The monks averred later that they saw many people moving about the place, together with sundry demons, some of whom were shadowy and

gigantic, and others barely to be distinguished from the men. These people, as well as their familiars, were occupied with the tending of reverberatory furnaces and immense pear-shaped and gourd-shaped vessels such as were used in alchemy. Some, also, were stooping above great fuming cauldrons, like sorcerers, busy with the brewing of terrible drugs. Against the opposite wall, there were two enormous vats, built of stone and mortar, whose circular sides rose higher than a man's head, so that Bernard and Stephane were unable to determine their contents. One of the vats gave forth a whitish glimmering; the other, a ruddy luminosity.

Near the vats, and somewhat between them, there stood a sort of low couch or litter, made of luxurious, weirdly figured fabrics such as the Saracens weave. On this the monks discerned a dwarfish being, pale and wizened, with eyes of chill flame that shone like evil beryls through the dusk. The dwarf, who had all the air of a feeble moribund, was supervising the toils of the men and their familiars.

The dazed eyes of the brothers began to comprehend other details. They saw that several corpses, among which they recognized that of Theophile, were lying on the middle floor, together with a heap of human bones that had been wrenched asunder at the joints, and great lumps of flesh piled like the carvings of butchers. One of the men was lifting the bones and dropping them into a cauldron beneath which there glowed a ruby-coloured fire; and another was flinging the lumps of flesh into a tub filled with some hueless liquid that gave forth an evil hissing as of a thousand serpents.

Others had stripped the grave-clothes from one of the cadavers, and were starting to assail it with long knives. Others still were mounting rude flights of stone stairs along the walls of the immense vats, carrying vessels filled with semi-liquescient matters which they emptied over the high rims.

Appalled at this vision of human and Satanic turpitude, and feeling a more than righteous indignation, the monks resumed their chanting of sonorous exorcisms and rushed forward. Their entrance, it appeared, was not perceived by the heinously occupied crew of sorcerers and devils.

Bernard and Stephane, filled with an ardour of godly wrath, were about to fling themselves upon the butchers who had started to assail the dead body. This corpse they recognized as being that of a notorious outlaw, named Jacques Le Loupgarou, who had been slain a few days previous in combat with the officers of the state. Le Loupgarou, noted for his brawn, his cunning and his ferocity, had long terrorized the woods and highways of Averoine. His great body had been half eviscerated by the swords of the constabulary; and his beard was stiff and purple with the dried blood of a ghastly wound that had cloven his face from temple to mouth. He had died unshriven, but nevertheless, the monks were unwilling to see his helpless cadaver put to some unhallowed use beyond the surmise of Christians.

The pale, malignant-looking dwarf had now perceived the brothers. They heard him cry out in a shrill, imperatory tone that rose above the ominous hiss of the cauldrons and the hoarse mutter of men and demons.

They knew not his words, which were those of some outlandish tongue and sounded like an incantation. Instantly, as if in response to an order, two of the men turned from their unholy chemistry, and lifting copper basins filled with an unknown, fetid liquor, hurled the contents of these vessels in the faces of Bernard and Stephane.

The brothers were blinded by the stinging fluid, which bit their flesh as with many serpents' teeth; and they were overcome by the noxious fumes, so that their great crosses dropped from their hands and they both fell unconscious on the castle floor.

Recovering anon their sight and their other senses, they found that their hands had been tied with heavy thongs of gut, so that they were now helpless and could no longer wield their crucifixes or the sprinklers of holy water which they carried.

In this ignominious condition, they heard the voice of the evil dwarf, commanding them to arise. They obeyed, though clumsily and with difficulty, being denied the assistance of their hands. Bernard, who was still sick with the poisonous vapour he had inhaled, fell twice before he succeeded in standing erect; and his discomfiture was greeted with a cachinnation of foul, obscene laughter from the assembled sorcerers.

Now, standing, the monks were taunted by the dwarf, who mocked and reviled them, with appalling blasphemies such as could be uttered only by a bond-servant of Satan. At last, according to their sworn testimony, he said to them:

“Return to your kennel, ye whelps of Ialdabaoth, and take with you this message: They that came here as many shall go forth as one.”

Then, in obedience to a dreadful formula spoken by the dwarf, two of the familiars, who had the shape of enormous and shadowy beasts, approached the body of Le Loupgarou and that of Brother Theophile. One of the foul demons, like a vapour that sinks into a marsh, entered the bloody nostrils of Le Loupgarou, disappearing inch by inch, till its horned and bestial head was withdrawn from sight. The other, in like manner, went in through the nostrils of Brother Theophile, whose head lay weird athwart his shoulder on the broken neck.

Then, when the demons had completed their possession, the bodies, in a fashion horrible to behold, were raised up from the castle floor, the one with ravelled entrails hanging from its wide wounds, the other with a head that dropped forward loosely on its bosom. Then, animated by their devils, the

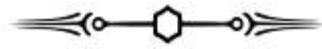
cadavers took up the crosses of hornbeam that had been dropped by Stephane and Bernard; and using the crosses for bludgeons, they drove the monks in ignominious flight from the castle, amid a loud, tempestuous howling of infernal laughter from the dwarf and his necromantic crew. And the nude corpse of Le Loupgarou and the robed cadaver of Theophile followed them far on the chasm-riven slopes below Ylourgne, striking great blows with the crosses, so that the backs of the two Cistercians were become a mass of bloody bruises.

After a defeat so signal and crushing, no more of the monks were emboldened to go up against Ylourgne. The whole monastery, thereafter, devoted itself to triple austerities, to quadrupled prayers; and awaiting the unknown will of God, and the equally obscure machinations of the Devil, maintained a pious faith that was somewhat tempered with trepidation.

In time, through goatherds who visited the monks, the tale of Stephane and Bernard went forth throughout Averoigne, adding to the grievous alarm that had been caused by the wholesale disappearance of the dead. No one knew what was really going on in the haunted castle or what disposition had been made of the hundreds of migratory corpses; for the light thrown on their fate by the monks' story, though lurid and frightful, was all too inconclusive; and the message sent by the dwarf was somewhat cabalistic.

Everyone felt, however, that some gigantic menace, some black, infernal enchantment, was being brewed within the ruinous walls. The malign, moribund dwarf was all too readily identified with the missing sorcerer, Nathaire; and his underlings, it was plain, were Nathaire's pupils.

4. The Going-Forth of Gaspard du Nord



ALONE IN HIS attic chamber, Gaspard du Nord, student of alchemy and sorcery and quondam pupil of Nathaire, sought repeatedly, but always in vain, to consult the viper-circled mirror. The glass remained obscure and cloudy, as with the risen fumes of Satanical alembics or baleful necromantic braziers. Haggard and weary with long nights of watching, Gaspard knew that Nathaire was even more vigilant than he.

Reading with anxious care the general configuration of the stars, he found the foretokening of a great evil that was to come upon Averoigne. But the nature of the evil was not clearly shown.

In the meanwhile the hideous resurrection and migration of the dead was taking place. All Averoigne shuddered at the manifold enormity. Like the timeless night of a Memphian plague, terror settled everywhere; and people spoke of each new atrocity in bated whispers, without daring to voice the execrable tale aloud. To Gaspard, as to everyone, the whispers came; and likewise, after the horror had apparently ceased in early midsummer, there came the appalling story of the Cistercian monks.

Now, at last, the long-baffled watcher found an inkling of that which he sought. The hiding-place of the fugitive necromancer and his apprentices, at least, had been uncovered; and the disappearing dead were clearly traced to their bourn. But still, even for the percipient Gaspard, there remained an undeclared enigma: the exact nature of the abominable brew, the hell-dark sorcery, that Nathaire was concocting in his remote den. Gaspard felt sure of one thing only: the dying, splenetic dwarf, knowing that his allotted time

was short, and hating the people of Averoine with a bottomless rancour, would prepare an enormous and maleficent magic without parallel.

Even with his knowledge of Nathaire's proclivities, and his awareness of the well-nigh inexhaustible arcanic science, the reserves of pit-deep wizardry possessed by the dwarf, he could form only vague, terrifical conjectures anent the incubated evil. But, as time went on, he felt an ever-deepening oppression, the adumbration of a monstrous menace crawling from the dark rim of the world. He could not shake off his disquietude; and finally he resolved despite the obvious perils of such an excursion, to pay a secret visit to the neighborhood of Ylourgne.

Gaspard, though he came of a well-to-do family, was at that time in straitened circumstances; for his devotion to a somewhat doubtful science had been disapproved by his father. His sole income was a small pittance, purveyed secretly to the youth by his mother and sister. This sufficed for his meagre food, the rent of his room, and a few books and instruments and chemicals; but it would not permit the purchase of a horse or even a humble mule for the proposed journey of more than forty miles.

Undaunted, he set forth on foot, carrying only a dagger and a wallet of food. He timed his wanderings so that he would reach Ylourgne at nightfall in the rising of a full moon. Much of his journey lay through the great, lowering forest, which approached the very walls of Vyones on the eastern side and ran in a sombre arc through Averoine to the mouth of the rocky valley below Ylourgne. After a few miles, he emerged from the mighty wood of pines and oaks and larches; and thenceforward, for the first day, followed the river Isoile through an open, well-peopled plain. He spent the warm summer night beneath a beech-tree, in the vicinity of a small village, not caring to sleep in the lonely woods where robbers and wolves — and creatures of a more baleful repute — were commonly supposed to dwell.

At evening of the second day, after passing through the wildest and oldest portion of the immemorial wood, he came to the steep, stony valley that led to his destination. This valley was the fountain-head of the Isoile, which had dwindled to a mere rivulet. In the brown twilight, between sunset and moonrise, he saw the lights of the Cistercian monastery; and opposite, on the piled, forbidding scarps, the grim and rugged mass of the ruinous stronghold of Ylourgne, with wan and wizard fires flickering behind its high embrasures. Apart from these fires, there was no sign of occupation; and he did not hear at any time the dismal noises reported by the monks.

Gaspard waited till the round moon, yellow as the eye of some immense nocturnal bird, had begun to peer above the darkling valley. Then, very cautiously, since the neighbourhood was strange to him, he started to make his way towards the sombre, brooding castle.

Even for one well-used to such climbing, the escalade would have offered enough difficulty and danger by moonlight. Several times, finding himself at the bottom of a sheer cliff, he was compelled to retrace his hard-won progress; and often he was saved from falling only by stunted shrubs and briars that had taken root in the niggard soil. Breathless, with torn raiment and scored and bleeding hands, he gained at length the shoulder of the craggy height, below the walls.

Here he paused to recover breath and recuperate his flagging strength. He could see from his vantage the pale reflection as of hidden flames, that beat upwards on the inner walls of the high-built donjon. He heard a low hum of confused noises, whose distance and direction were alike baffling. Sometimes they seemed to float downwards from the black battlements, sometimes to issue from subterranean depths far in the hill.

Apart from this remote, ambiguous hum, the night was locked in a mortal stillness. The very winds appeared to shun the vicinity of the dread

castle. An unseen, clammy cloud of paralyzing evil hung removeless upon all things; and the pale, swollen moon, the patroness of witches and sorcerers, distilled her green poison above the crumbling towers in a silence older than time.

Gaspard felt the obscenely clinging weight of a more burdensome thing than his own fatigue when he resumed his progress towards the barbican. Invisible webs of the waiting, ever-gathering evil seemed to impede him. The slow, noisome flapping of intangible wings was heavy in his face. He seemed to breathe a surging wind from unfathomable vaults and caverns of corruption. Inaudible howlings, derisive or minatory, thronged in his ears, and foul hands appeared to thrust him back. But, bowing his head as if against a blowing gale, he went on and climbed the mounded ruin of the barbican, into the weedy courtyard.

The place was deserted, to all seeming; and much of it was still deep in the shadows of the walls and turrets. Near by, in the black, silver-crenellated pile, Gaspard saw the open, cavernous doorway described by the monks. It was lit from within by a lurid glare, wannish and eerie as marsh-fires. The humming noise, now audible as a muttering of voices, issued from the doorway; and Gaspard thought that he could see dark, sooty figures moving rapidly in the lit interior.

Keeping in the farther shadows, he stole along the courtyard, making a sort of circuit amid the ruins. He did not dare to approach the open entrance for fear of being seen; though, as far as he could tell, the place was unguarded.

He came to the donjon, on whose upper wall the wan light flickered obliquely through a sort of rift in the long building adjacent. This opening was at some distance from the ground; and Gaspard saw that it had been formerly the door to a stony balcony. A flight of broken steps led upwards

along the wall to the half-crumbled remnant of this balcony; and it occurred to the youth that he might climb the steps and peer unobserved into the interior of Ylourgne.

Some of the stairs were missing; and all were in heavy shadow. Gaspard found his way precariously to the balcony, pausing once in considerable alarm when a fragment of the worn stone, loosened by his footfall, dropped with a loud clattering on the courtyard flags below. Apparently it was unheard by the occupants of the castle; and after a little he resumed his climbing.

Cautiously he neared the large, ragged opening through which the light poured upwards. Crouching on a narrow ledge, which was all that remained of the balcony, he peered in on a most astounding and terrific spectacle, whose details were so bewildering that he could barely comprehend their import till after many minutes.

It was plain that the story told by the monks — allowing for their religious bias — had been far from extravagant. Almost the whole interior of the half-ruined pile had been torn down and dismantled to afford room for the activities of Nathaire. This demolition in itself was a superhuman task for whose execution the sorcerer must have employed a legion of familiars as well as his ten pupils.

The vast chamber was fitfully illumed by the glare of athanors and braziers; and, above all, by the weird glimmering from the huge stone vats. Even from his high vantage, the watcher could not see the contents of these vats; but a white luminosity poured, upwards from the rim of one of them, and a flesh-tinted phosphorescence from the other.

Gaspard had seen certain of the experiments and evocations of Nathaire, and was all too familiar with the appurtenances of the dark arts. Within certain limits, he was not squeamish; nor was it likely that he would have

been terrified overmuch by the shadowy, uncouth shapes of demons who toiled in the pit below him side by side with the blackclad pupils of the sorcerer. But a cold horror clutched his heart when he saw the incredible, enormous thing that occupied the central floor: the colossal human skeleton a hundred feet in length, stretching for more than the extent of the old castle hall; the skeleton whose bony right foot the group of men and devils, to all appearance, were busily clothing with human flesh!

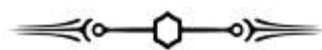
The prodigious and macabre framework, complete in every part, with ribs like arches of some Satanic nave, shone as if it were still heated by the fires of an infernal welding. It seemed to shimmer and burn with unnatural life, to quiver with malign disquietude in the flickering glare and gloom. The great fingerbones, curving claw-like on the floor, appeared as if they were about to close upon some helpless prey. The tremendous teeth were set in an everlasting grin of sardonic cruelty and malice. The hollow eye-sockets, deep as Tartarean wells, appeared to seethe with myriad, mocking lights, like the eyes of elementals swimming upwards in obscene shadow.

Gaspard was stunned by the shocking and stupendous fantasmagoria that yawned before him like a peopled hell. Afterwards he was never wholly sure of certain things, and could remember very little of the actual manner in which the work of the men and their assistants was being carried on. Dim, dubious, bat-like creatures seemed to be flitting to and fro between one of the stone vats and the group that toiled like sculptors, clothing the bony foot with a reddish plasm which they applied and moulded like so much clay. Gaspard thought, but was not certain later, that this plasm, which gleamed as if with mingled blood and fire, was being brought from the rosy-litten vat in vessels borne by the claws of the shadowy flying creatures. None of them, however, approached the other vat, whose wannish light was momentarily enfeebled, as if it were dying down.

He looked for the minikin figure of Nathaire, whom he could not distinguish in the crowded scene. The sick necromancer — if he had not already succumbed to the little-known disease that had long wasted him like an inward flame — was no doubt hidden from view by the colossal skeleton and was perhaps directing the labours of the men and demons from his couch.

Spellbound on that precarious ledge, the watcher failed to hear the furtive, cat-like feet that were climbing behind him on the ruinous stairs. Too late, he heard the clink of a loose fragment close upon his heels; and turning in startlement, he toppled into sheer oblivion beneath the impact of a cudgel-like blow, and did not even know that the beginning fall of his body towards the courtyard had been arrested by his assailant's arms.

5. The Horror of Ylourgne



GASPARD, RETURNING FROM his dark plunge into Lethean emptiness, found himself gazing into the eyes of Nathaire: those eyes of liquid night and ebony, in which swam the chill, malignant fires of stars that had gone down to irremediable perdition. For some time, in the confusion of his senses, he could see nothing but the eyes, which seemed to have drawn him forth like baleful magnets from his swoon. Apparently disembodied, or set in a face too vast for human cognizance, they burned before him in chaotic murk; Then, by degrees, he saw the other features of the sorcerer, and the details of a lurid scene; and became aware of his own situation.

Trying to lift his hands to his aching head, he found that they were bound tightly together at the wrists. He was half lying, half leaning against an object with hard planes and edges that irked his back. This object he discovered to be a sort of alchemic furnace, or athanor, part of a litter of disused apparatus that stood or lay on the castle floor. Cupels, aludels, cucurbits, like enormous gourds and globes, were mingled in strange confusion with the piled, iron-clasped books and the sooty cauldrons and braziers of a darker science.

Nathaire, propped among Saracenic cushions with arabesques of sullen gold and fulgorant scarlet, was peering upon him from a kind of improvised-couch, made with bales of Orient rugs and arrases, to whose luxury the rude walls of the castle, stained with mould and mottled with dead fungi, offered a grotesque foil. Dim lights and evilly swooping shadows flickered across the scene; and Gaspard could hear a guttural hum of voices behind him. Twisting his head a little, he saw one of the stone

vats, whose rosy luminosity was blurred and blotted by vampire wings that went to and fro.

“Welcome,” said Nathaire, after an interval in which the student began to perceive the fatal progress of illness in the painpinched features before him. “So Gaspard du Nord has come to see his former master!” The harsh, imperatory voice, with demoniac volume, issued appallingly from the wizened frame.

“I have come,” said Gaspard, in laconic echo. “Tell me, what devil’s work is this in which I find you engaged? And what have you done with the dead bodies that were stolen by your accursed familiars?”

The frail, dying body of Nathaire, as if possessed by some sardonic fiend, rocked to and fro on the luxurious couch in a long, violent gust of laughter, without other reply.

“If your looks bear creditable witness,” said Gaspard, when the baleful laughter had ceased, “you are mortally ill, and the time is short in which you can hope to atone for your deeds of malice and make your peace with God — if indeed it still be possible for you to make peace. What foul and monstrous brew are you preparing, to ensure the ultimate perdition of your soul?”

The dwarf was again seized by a spasm of diabolic mirth.

“Nay, nay, my good Gaspard,” he said finally. “I have made another bond than the one with which puling cowards try to purchase the good will and forgiveness of the heavenly Tyrant. Hell may take me in the end, if it will; but Hell has paid, and will still pay, an ample and goodly price. I must die soon, it is true, for my doom is written in the stars: but in death, by the grace of Satan, I live again, and shall go forth endowed with the mighty thews of the Anakim, to visit vengeance on the people of Averogne, who

have long hated me for my necromantic wisdom and have held me in derision for my dwarf stature.”

“What madness is this whereof you dream?” asked the youth, appalled by the more than human frenzy and malignity that seemed to dilate the shrunken frame of Nathaire and stream in Tartarean lustre from his eyes.

“It is no madness, but a veritable thing: a miracle, mayhap, as life itself is a miracle... From the fresh bodies of the dead, which otherwise would have rotted away in charnel foulness, my pupils and familiars are making for me, beneath my instruction, the giant form whose skeleton you have beheld. My soul, at the death of its present body, will pass into this colossal tenement through the working of certain spells of transmigration in which my faithful assistants have also been carefully instructed.”

“If you had remained with me, Gaspard, and had not drawn back in your petty, pious squeamishness from the marvels and profundities that I should have unveiled for you, it would now be your privilege to share in the creation of this prodigy... And if you had come to Ylourgne a little sooner in your presumptuous prying, I might have made a certain use of your stout bones and muscles... the same use I have made of other young men, who died through accident or violence. But it is too late even for this, since the building of the bones has been completed, and it remains only to invest them with human flesh. My good Gaspard, there is nothing whatever to be done with you — except to put you safely out of the way. Providentially, for this purpose, there is an oubliette beneath the castle: a somewhat dismal lodging-place, no doubt, but one that was made strong and deep by the grim lords of Ylourgne.”

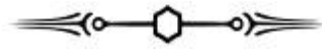
Gaspard was unable to frame any reply to this sinister and extraordinary speech. Searching his horror-frozen brain for words, he felt himself seized from behind by the hands of unseen beings who had come, no doubt, in

answer to some gesture of Nathaire: a gesture which the captive had not perceived. He was blindfolded with some heavy fabric, mouldy and musty as a gravecloth, and was led stumbling through the litter of strange apparatus, and down a winding flight of ruinous, narrow stairs from which the noisome breath of stagnating water, mingled with the oily muskiness of serpents, arose to meet him.

He appeared to descend for a distance that would admit of no return. Slowly the stench grew stronger, more insupportable; the stairs ended; a door clanged sullenly on rusty hinges; and Gaspard was thrust forward on a damp, uneven floor that seemed to have been worn away by myriad feet.

He heard the grating of a ponderous slab of stone. His wrists were untied, the bandage was removed from his eyes, and he saw by the light of flickering torches a round hole that yawned in the oozing floor at his feet. Beside it was the lifted slab that had formed its lid. Before he could turn to see the faces of his captors, to learn if they were men or devils, he was seized rudely and thrust into the gaping hole. He fell through Erebus-like darkness, for what seemed an immense distance, before he struck bottom. Lying half stunned in a shallow, fetid pool, he heard the funereal thud of the heavy slab as it slid back into place far above him.

6. The Vaults of Ylourgne



GASPARD WAS REVIVED, after a while, by the chillness of the water in which he lay. His garments were half soaked; and the slimy mephitic pool, as he discovered by his first movement, was within an inch of his mouth. He could hear a steady, monotonous dripping somewhere in the rayless night of his dungeon. He staggered to his feet, finding that his bones were still intact, and began a cautious exploration, Foul drops fell upon his hair and lifted face as he moved; his feet slipped and splashed in the rotten water; there were angry, vehement hissings, and serpentine coils slithered coldly across his ankles.

He soon came to a rough wall of stone, and following the wall with his finger-tips, he tried to determine the extent of the oubliette. The place was more or less circular, without corners, and he failed to form any just idea of its circuit. Somewhere in his wanderings, he found a shelving pile of rubble that rose above the water against the wall; and here, for the sake of comparative dryness and comfort, he ensconced himself, after dispossessing a number of outraged reptiles. These creatures, it seemed, were inoffensive, and probably belonged to some species of watersnake; but he shivered at the touch of their clammy scales.

Sitting on the rubble-heap, Gaspard reviewed in his mind the various horrors of a situation that was infinitely dismal and desperate. He had learned the incredible, soul-shaking secret of Ylourgne, the unimaginably monstrous and blasphemous project of Nathaire; but now, immured in this noisome hole as in a subterranean tomb, in depths beneath the devil-haunted pile, he could not even warn the world of imminent menace.

The wallet of food, now more than half empty, with which he had started from Vyones, was still hanging at his back; and he assured himself by investigation that his captors had not troubled to deprive him of his dagger. Gnawing a crust of stale bread in the darkness, and caressing with his hand the hilt of the precious weapon, he sought for some rift in the all-environing despair.

He had no means of measuring the black hours that went over him with the slowness of a slime-clogged river, crawling in blind silence to a subterrene sea. The ceaseless drip of water, probably from sunken hill-springs that had supplied the castle in former years alone broke the stillness; but the sound became in time an equivocal monotone that suggested to his half-delirious mind the mirthless and perpetual chuckling of unseen imps. At last, from sheer bodily exhaustion, he fell into troubled nightmare-ridden chamber.

He could not tell if it were night or noon in the world without when he awakened; for the same stagnant darkness, unrelieved by ray or glimmer, brimmed the oubliette. Shivering, he became aware of a steady draught that blew upon him: a dank, unwholesome air, like the breath of unsunned vaults that had wakened into cryptic life and activity during his sleep. He had not noticed the draught heretofore; and his numb brain was startled into sudden hope by the intimation which it conveyed. Obviously there was some underground rift or channel through which the air entered; and this rift might somehow prove to be a place of egress from the oubliette.

Getting to his feet, he groped uncertainly forward in the direction of the draught. He stumbled over something that cracked and broke beneath his heels, and narrowly checked himself from falling on his face in the slimy, serpent-haunted pool. Before he could investigate the obstruction or resume his blind groping, he heard a harsh, grating noise above, and a wavering

shaft of yellow light came down through the oubliette's opened mouth. Dazzled, he looked up, and saw the round hole ten or twelve feet overhead, through which a dark hand had reached down with a flaring torch. A small basket, containing a loaf of coarse bread and a bottle of wine, was being lowered at the end of a cord.

Gaspard took the bread and wine, and the basket was drawn up. Before the withdrawal of the torch and the re-depositing of the slab, he contrived to make a hasty survey of his dungeon. The place was roughly circular, as he had surmised, and was perhaps fifteen feet in diameter. The thing over which he had stumbled was a human skeleton, lying half on the rubble-heap, half in the filthy water. It was brown and rotten with age, and its garments had long melted away in patches of liquid mould.

The walls were guttered and runnelled by centuries of ooze and their very stone, it seemed, was rotting slowly to decay. In the opposite side, at the bottom, he saw the opening he had, suspected: a low mouth, not much bigger than a foxes' hole, into which the sluggish water flowed. His heart sank at the sight; for, even if the water were deeper than it seemed, the hole was far too strait for the passage of a man's body. In a state of hopelessness that was like a veritable suffocation, he found his way back to the rubble-pile when the light had been withdrawn.

The loaf of bread and the bottle of wine were still in his hands. Mechanically, with dull, sodden hunger, he munched and drank. Afterwards he felt stronger; and the sour, common wine served to warm him and perhaps helped to inspire him with the idea which he presently conceived.

Finishing the bottle, he found his way across the dungeon to the low, burrow-like hole. The entering air current had strengthened, and this he took for a good omen. Drawing his dagger, he started to pick with the point at the half-rotten, decomposing wall, in an effort to enlarge the opening. He was

forced to kneel in noisome silt; and the writhing coils of water-snakes, hissing frightfully, crawled across his legs as he worked. Evidently the hole was their means of ingress and egress, to and from the oubliette.

The stone crumbled readily beneath his dagger, and Gaspard forgot the horror and ghastliness of his situation in the hope of escape. He had no means of knowing the thickness of the wall; or the nature and extent of the subterrenes that lay beyond; but he felt sure that there was some channel of connection with the outer air.

For hours or days, it seemed, he toiled with his dagger, digging blindly at the soft wall and removing the dèbris that splashed in the water beside him. After a while, prone on his belly, he crept into the hole he had enlarged; and burrowing like some laborious mole, he made his way onwards inch by inch.

At last, to his prodigious relief, the dagger-point went through into empty space. He broke away with his hands the thin shell of obstructing stone that remained; then, crawling on in the darkness, he found that he could stand upright on a sort of shelving floor.

Straightening his cramped limbs, he moved on very cautiously. He was in a narrow vault or tunnel, whose sides he could touch simultaneously with his outstretched finger-tips. The floor was a downwards incline; and the water deepened, rising to his knees and then to his waist. Probably the place had once been used as an underground exit from the castle; and the roof, falling in, had dammed the water.

More than a little dismayed, Gaspard began to wonder if he had exchanged the foul, skeleton-haunted oubliette for something even worse. The night around and before him was still untouched by any ray, and the air-current, though strong, was laden with dankness and mouldiness as of interminable vaults.

Touching the tunnel-sides at intervals as he plunged hesitantly into the deepening water, he found a sharp angle, giving upon free space at his right. The space proved to be the mouth of an intersecting passage, whose flooded bottom was at least level and went no deeper into the stagnant foulness. Exploring it, he stumbled over the beginning of a flight of upward steps. Mounting these through the shoaling water, he soon found himself on dry stone.

The stairs, narrow, broken, irregular, without landings, appeared to wind in some eternal spiral that was coiled lightlessly about the bowels of Ylourgne. They were close and stifling as a tomb, and plainly they were not the source of the air-current which Gaspard had started to follow. Whither they would lead he knew not; nor could he tell if they were the same stairs by which he had been conducted to his dungeon. But he climbed steadily, pausing only at long intervals to regain his breath as best he could in the dead, mephitic-burdened air.

At length, in the solid darkness, far above, he began to hear a mysterious, muffled sound: a dull but recurrent crash as of mighty blocks and masses of falling stone. The sound was unspeakably ominous and dismal, and it seemed to shake the unfathomable walls around Gaspard, and to thrill with a sinister vibration in the steps on which he trod.

He climbed now with redoubled caution and alertness, stopping ever and anon to listen. The recurrent crashing noise grew louder, more ominous, as if it were immediately above; and the listener crouched on the dark stairs for a time that might have been many minutes, without daring to go farther. At last, with disconcerting suddenness, the sound came to an end, leaving a strained and fearful stillness.

With many baleful conjectures, not knowing what fresh enormity he should find, Gaspard ventured to resume his climbing. Again, in the blank

and solid stillness, he was met by a sound: the dim, reverberant chanting of voices, as in some Satanic mass or liturgy with dirge-like cadences that turned to intolerably soaring paeans of evil triumph. Long before he could recognize the words, he shivered at the strong, malefic throbbing of the measured rhythm, whose fall and rise appeared somehow to correspond to the heartbeats of some colossal demon.

The stairs turned, for the hundredth time in their tortuous spiral; and coming forth from that long midnight, Gaspard blinked in the wan glimmering that streamed towards him from above. The choral voices met him in a more sonorous burst of infernal sound, and he knew the words for those of a rare and potent incantation, used by sorcerers for a supremely foul, supremely maleficent purpose. Affrightedly, as he climbed the last steps, he knew the thing that was taking place amid the ruins of Ylourgne.

Lifting his head warily above the castle floor, he saw that the stairs ended in a far corner of the vast room in which he had beheld Nathaire's unthinkable creation. The whole extent of the internally dismantled building lay before him, filled with a weird glare in which the beams of the slightly gibbous moon were mingled with the ruddy flames of dying athanors and the coiling, multi-coloured tongues that rose from necromantic braziers.

Gaspard, for an instant, was puzzled by the flood of full moonlight amid the ruins. Then he saw that almost the whole inner wall of the castle, giving on the courtyard, had been removed. It was the tearing-down of the prodigious blocks, no doubt through an extrahuman labour levied by sorcery, that he had heard during his ascent from the subterrene vaults. His blood curdled, he felt an actual horripilation, as he realized the purpose for which the wall had been demolished.

It was evident that a whole day and part of another night had gone by since his immurement; for the moon rode high in the pale sapphire welkin.

Bathed in its chilly glare, the huge vats no longer emitted their eerie and electric phosphorescence. The couch of Saracen fabrics, on which Gaspard had beheld the dying dwarf, was now half hidden from view by the mounting fumes of braziers and thuribles, amid which the sorcerer's ten pupils, clad in sable and scarlet, were performing their hideous and repugnant rite, with its malefically measured litany.

Fearfully, as one who confronts an apparition reared up from nether hell, Gaspard beheld the colossus that lay inert as if in Cyclopean sleep on the castle flags. The thing was no longer a skeleton: the limbs were rounded into bossed, enormous thews, like the limbs of Biblical giants; the flanks were like an insuperable wall; the deltoids of the mighty chest were broad as platform; the hands could have crushed the bodies of men like millstones... But the face of the stupendous monster, seen in profile athwart the pouring moon, was the face of the Satanic dwarf, Nathaire — remagnified a hundred times, but the same in its implacable madness and malevolence!

The vast bosom seemed to rise and fall; and during a pause of the necromantic ritual, Gaspard heard the unmistakable sound of a mighty respiration. The eye in the profile was closed; but its lid appeared to tremble like a great curtain, as if the monster were about to wake; and the outflung hand, with fingers pale and bluish as a row of corpses, twitched unquietly on the castle flags.

An insupportable terror seized the watcher; but even this terror could not induce him to return to the noisome vaults he had left. With infinite hesitation and trepidation, he stole forth from the corner, keeping in a zone of ebon shadow that flanked the castle wall.

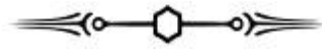
As he went, he saw for a moment, through bellying folds of vapour, the couch on which the shrunken form of Nathaire was lying pallid and

motionless. It seemed that the dwarf was dead, or had fallen into a stupor preceding death. Then the choral voices, crying their dreadful incantation, rose higher in Satanic triumph; the vapours eddied like a hell-born cloud, coiling about the sorcerers in python-shaped volumes, and hiding again the Orient couch and its corpse-like occupant.

A thraldom of measureless evil oppressed the air. Gaspard felt that the awful transmigration, evoked and implored with everswelling, liturgic blasphemies, was about to take place — had perhaps already occurred. He thought that the breathing giant stirred, like one who tosses in light slumber.

Soon the towering, massively recumbent hulk was interposed between Gaspard and the chanting necromancers. They had not seen him; and he now dared to run swiftly, and gained the courtyard unpursued and unchallenged. Thence, without looking back, he fled like a devil-hunted thing upon the steep and chasm-riven slopes below Ylourgne.

7. The Coming of the Colossus



AFTER THE CESSATION of the exodus of liches, a universal terror still prevailed; a wide-flung shadow of apprehension, infernal and funereal, lay stagnantly on Averoigne. There were strange and disastrous portents in the aspect of the skies: flame-bearded meteors had been seen to fall beyond the eastern hills; a comet far in the south had swept the stars with its luminous bosom for a few nights, and had then faded, leaving among men the prophecy of bale and pestilence to come. By day the air was oppressed and sultry, and the blue heavens were heated as if by whitish fires. Clouds of thunder, darkling and withdrawn, shook their fulgurant lances on the far horizons, like some beleaguering Titan army. A murrain, such as would come from the working of wizard spells, was abroad among the cattle. All these signs and prodigies were an added heaviness on the burdened spirits of men, who went to and fro in daily fear of the hidden preparations and machinations of hell.

But, until the actual breaking-forth of the incubated menace, there was no one, save Gaspard du Nord, who had knowledge of its veritable form. And Gaspard, fleeing headlong beneath the gibbous moon towards Vyones, and fearing to hear the tread of a colossal pursuer at any moment, had thought it more than useless to give warning in such towns and villages as lay upon his line of sight. Where, indeed — even if warned — could men hope to hide themselves from the awful thing, begotten by Hell on the ravished charnel, that would walk forth like the Anakim to visit its roaring wrath on a trampled world?

So, all that night, and throughout the day that followed, Gaspard du Nord, with the dried slime of the oubliette on his briar-shredded raiment, plunged like a madman through the towering woods that were haunted by robbers and were-wolves. The westward-falling moon flickered in his eyes betwixt the gnarled sombre boles as he ran; and the dawn overtook him with the pale shafts of its searching arrows. The noon poured over him its white sultriness, like furnace-heated metal sublimed into light; and the clotted filth that clung to his tatters was again turned into slime by his own sweat. But still he pursued his nightmare-harried way, while a vague, seemingly hopeless plan took form in his mind.

In the interim, several monks of the Cistercian brotherhood, watching the grey wall of Ylourgne at early dawn with their habitual vigilance, were the first, after Gaspard, to behold the monstrous horror created by the necromancers. Their account may have been somewhat tinged by a pious exaggeration; but they swore that the giant rose abruptly, standing more than waist-high above the ruins of the barbican, amid a sudden leaping of long-tongued fires and a swirling of pitchy fumes erupted from Malbolge. The giant's head was level with the high top of the donjon, and his right arm, out-thrust, lay like a bar of stormy cloud athwart the new-risen sun.

The monks fell grovelling to their knees, thinking that the Archfoe himself had come forth, using Ylourgne for his gateway from the Pit. Then, across the mile-wide valley, they heard a thunderous peal of demoniac laughter; and the giant, climbing over the mounded barbican at a single step, began to descend the scarped and craggy hill.

When he drew nearer, bounding from slope to slope, his features were manifestly those of some great devil animated with ire and malice towards the sons of Adam. His hair, in matted locks, streamed behind him like a mass of black pythons; his naked skin was livid and pale and cadaverous,

with the skin of the dead; but beneath it, the stupendous thews of a Titan swelled and rippled. The eyes, wide and glaring flamed like lidless cauldrons heated by the fires of the unplumbed Pit.

The rumour of his coming passed like a gale of terror through the Monastery. Many of the Brothers, deeming discretion the better part of religious fervour, hid themselves in the stone-hewn cellars and vaults. Others crouched in their cells, mumbling and shrieking incoherent pleas to all the Saints. Still others, the most courageous, repaired in a body to the chapel and knelt in solemn prayer before the wooden Christ on the great crucifix.

Bernard and Stephane, now somewhat recovered from their grievous beating, alone dared to watch the advance of the giant. Their horror was inexpressibly increased when they began to recognize in the colossal features a magnified likeness to the lineaments of that evil dwarf who had presided over the dark, unhallowed activities of Ylourgne; and the laughter of the colossus, as he came down the valley, was like a tempest-borne echo of the damnable cachinnation that had followed their ignominious flight from the haunted stronghold. To Bernard and Stephane, however, it seemed merely that the dwarf, who was no doubt an actual demon, had chosen to appear in his natural form.

Pausing in the valley-bottom, the giant stood opposite the monastery with his flame-filled eyes on a level with the window from which Bernard and Stephane were peering. He laughed again — an awful laugh, like a subterranean rumbling — and then, stooping, he picked up a handful of boulders as if they had been pebbles, and proceeded to pelt the monastery. The boulders crashed against the walls, as if hurled from great catapults or mangonels of war; but the stout building held, though shaken grievously.

Then, with both hands, the colossus tore loose an immense rock that was deeply embedded in the hillside; and lifting this rock, he flung it at the stubborn walls. The tremendous mass broke in an entire side of the chapel; and those who had gathered therein were found later, crushed into bloody pulp amid the splinters of their carven Christ.

After that, as if disdaining to palter any further with a prey so insignificant, the colossus turned his back on the little monastery, and like some fiend-born Goliath, went roaring down the valley into Averoigne.

As he departed, Bernard and Stephane, still watching from their window, saw a thing they had not perceived heretofore: a huge basket made of planking, that hung suspended by ropes between the giant's shoulders. In the basket, ten men — the pupils and assistants of Nathaire — were being carried like so many dolls or puppets in a peddler's pack.

Of the subsequent wanderings and depredations of the colossus, a hundred legends were long current throughout Averoigne: tales of an unexampled ghastliness, a wanton diabolism without parallel in all the histories of that demon-pestered land.

The goatherds of the hills below Ylourgne saw him coming, and fled with their nimble-footed flocks to the highest ridges. To these he paid little heed, merely trampling them down like beetles when they could not escape from his path. Following the hillstream that was the source of the river Isoile, he came to the verge of the great forest; and here, it is related, he tore up a towering ancient pine by the roots, and snapping off the mighty boughs with his hands, shaped it into a cudgel which he carried henceforward.

With this cudgel, heavier than a battering-ram, he pounded into shapeless ruin a wayside shrine in the outer woods. A hamlet fell in his way, and he strode through it, beating in the roofs, toppling the walls, and crushing the inhabitants beneath his feet.

To and fro in a mad frenzy of destruction, like a deathdrunken Cyclops, he wandered all that day. Even the fierce beasts of the woodland ran from him in fear. The wolves, in mid-hunt, abandoned their quarry and retired, howling dismally with terror, to their rocky dens. The black, savage hunting-dogs of the forest barons would not face him, and hid whimpering in their kennels.

Men heard his mighty laughter, his stormy bellowing; they saw his approach from a distance of many leagues, and fled or concealed themselves as best they could. The lords of moated castles called in their men-at-arms, drew up their drawbridges and prepared as if for the siege of an army. The peasants hid themselves in caverns, in cellars, in old wells, and even beneath hay-mounds, hoping that he would pass them by unnoticed. The churches were crammed with refugees who sought protection of the Cross, deeming that Satan himself, or one of his chief lieutenants, had risen to harry and lay waste the land.

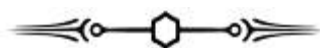
In a voice like summer thunder, mad maledictions, unthinkable obscenities and blasphemies were uttered ceaselessly by the giant as he went to and fro. Men heard him address the litter of black-clad figures that he carried on his back, in tones of admonishment or demonstration such as a master would use to his pupils. People who had known Nathaire recognized the incredible likeness of the huge features, the similarity of the swollen voice to his. A rumour went abroad that the dwarf sorcerer, through his loathly bond with the Adversary, had been permitted to transfer his hateful soul into this Titanic form; and, bearing his pupils with him, had returned to vent an insatiable ire, a bottomless rancour, on the world that had mocked him for his puny physique and reviled him for his sorcery. The charnel genesis of the monstrous avatar was also rumoured; and, indeed it was said that the colossus had openly proclaimed his identity.

It would be tedious to make explicit mention of all the enormities, all the atrocities, that were ascribed to the marauding giant... There were people — mostly priests and women, it is told — whom he picked up as they fled, and pulled limb from limb as a child might quarter an insect... And there were worse things, not to be named in this record...

Many eye-witnesses told how he hunted Pierre, the Lord of La Frênaie, who had gone forth with his dogs and men to chase a noble stag in the nearby forest. Overtaking horse and rider, he caught them with one hand, and bearing them aloft as he strode over the tree-tops, he hurled them later against the granite walls of the Chateau of La Frênaie in passing. Then, catching the red stag that Pierre had hunted, he flung it after them; and the huge bloody blotches made by the impact of the bashed bodies remained long on the castle stone, and were never wholly washed away by the autumn rains and the winter snows.

Countless tales were told, also, of the deeds of obscene sacrilege and profanation committed by the colossus: of the wooden Virgin that he flung into the Isoile above Ximes, lashed with human gut to the rotting, mail-clad body of an infamous outlaw; of the wormy corpses that he dug with his hands from unconsecrated graves and hurled into the courtyard of the Benedictine abbey of Perigon; of the Church of Ste. Zenobie, which he buried with its priests and congregation beneath a mountain of ordure made by the gathering of all the dungheaps from neighbouring farms.

8. The Laying of the Colossus



BACK AND FORTH, in an irregular, drunken, zigzag course, from end to end and side to side of the harried realm, the giant strode without pause, like an energumen possessed by some implacable fiend of mischief and murder, leaving behind him, as a reaper leaves his swath, an ever-lengthening zone of havoc, of rapine and carnage. And when the sun, blackened by the smoke of burning villages, had set luridly beyond the forest, men still saw him moving in the dusk, and heard still the portentous rumbling of his mad, stormy cachinnation.

Nearing the gates of Vyones at sunset, Gaspard du Nord saw behind him, through gaps in the ancient wood, the far-off head and shoulders of the terrible colossus, who moved along the Isoile, stooping from sight at intervals in some horrid deed.

Though numb with weariness and exhaustion, Gaspard quickened his flight. He did not believe, however, that the monster would try to invade Vyones, the especial object of Nathaire's hatred and malice, before the following day. The evil soul of the sorcerous dwarf, exulting in its almost infinite capacity for harm and destruction, would defer the crowning act of vengeance, and would continue to terrorize, during the night, the outlying villages and rural districts.

In spite of his rags and filth, which rendered him practically unrecognizable and gave him a most disreputable air, Gaspard was admitted without question by the guards at the city gate. Vyones was already thronged with people who had fled to the sanctuary of its stout walls from the adjacent countryside; and no one, not even of the most dubious

character, was denied admittance. The walls were lined with archers and pike-bearers, gathered in readiness to dispute the entrance of the giant. Crossbowmen were stationed above the gates, and mangonels were mounted at short intervals along the entire circuit of the ramparts. The city seethed and hummed like an agitated hive.

Hysteria and pandemonium prevailed in the streets. Pale, panic-stricken faces milled everywhere in an aimless stream. Hurrying torches flared dolorously in the twilight that deepened as if with the shadow of impending wings arisen from Erebus. The gloom was clogged with intangible fear, with webs of stifling oppression. Through all this rout of wild disorder and frenzy, Gaspard, like a spent but indomitable swimmer breasting some tide of eternal, viscid nightmare, made his way slowly to his attic lodgings.

Afterwards, he could scarcely remember eating and drinking. Overworn beyond the limit of bodily and spiritual endurance, he threw himself down on his pallet without removing his ooze-stiffened tatters, and slept soddenly till an hour half-way between midnight and dawn.

He awoke with the death-pale beams of the gibbous moon shining upon him through his window; and rising, spent the balance of the night in making certain occult preparations which, he felt, offered the only possibility of coping with the fiendish monster that had been created and animated by Nathaire.

Working feverishly by the light of the westering moon and a single dim taper, Gaspard assembled various ingredients of familiar alchemic use which he possessed, and compounded from these, through a long and somewhat cabalistic process, a dark-grey powder which he had seen employed by Nathaire on numerous occasions. He had reasoned that the colossus, being formed from the bones and flesh of dead men unlawfully raised up, and energized only by the soul of a dead sorcerer, would be

subject to the influence of this powder, which Nathaire had used for the laying of resurrected liches. The powder, if cast in the nostrils of such cadavers, would cause them to, return peacefully to their tombs and lie down in a renewed slumber of death.

Gaspard made a considerable quantity of the mixture, arguing that no mere finger-pinch would suffice for the lulling of the gigantic charnel monstrosity. His guttering yellow candle was dimmed by the white dawn as he ended the Latin formula of fearsome verbal invocation from which the compound would derive much of its efficacy. The formula, which called for the cooperation of Alastor and other evil spirits, he used with unwillingness. But he knew that there was no alternative: sorcery could be fought only with sorcery.

Morning came with new terrors to Vyones. Gaspard had felt, through a sort of intuition, that the vengeful colossus, who was said to have wandered with unhuman tirelessness and diabolic energy all night through Averroigne, would approach the hated city early in the day. His intuition was confirmed; for scarcely had he finished his occult labours when he heard a mounting hubbub in the streets, and above the shrill, dismal clamour of frightened voices, the far-off roaring of the giant.

Gaspard knew that he must lose no time, if he were to post himself in a place of vantage from which he could throw his powder into the nostrils of the hundred-foot colossus. The city walls and even most of the church spires, were not lofty enough for this purpose; and a brief reflection told him that the great cathedral, standing at the core of Vyones, was the one place from whose roof he could front the invader with success. He felt sure that the men-at-arms on the walls could do little to prevent the monster from entering and wreaking his malevolent will. No earthly weapon could injure a being of such bulk and nature; for even a cadaver of normal size,

reared up in this fashion, could be shot full of arrows or transfixed by a dozen pikes without retarding its progress.

Hastily he filled a huge leathern pouch with the powder; and carrying the pouch at his belt, he joined the agitated press of people in the street. Many were fleeing towards the cathedral, to seek the shelter of its august sanctity; and he had only to let himself be borne along by the frenzy-driven stream.

The cathedral nave was packed with worshippers, and solemn masses were being said by priests whose voices faltered at times with inward panic. Unheeded by the wan, despairing throng, Gaspard found a flight of coiling stairs that led tortuously to the gargoyle-warded roof of the high tower.

Here he posted himself, crouching behind the stone figure of a cat-headed griffin. From his vantage he could see, beyond the crowded spires and gables, the approaching giant, whose head and torso loomed above the city walls. A cloud of arrows, visible even at that distance, rose to meet the monster, who apparently did not even pause to pluck them from his hide. Great boulders hurled from mangonels were no more to him than a pelting of gravel; the heavy bolts of arbalests, embedded in his flesh, were mere slivers.

Nothing could stay his advance. The tiny figures of a company of pikemen, who opposed him with out-thrust weapons, swept from the wall above the eastern gate by a single sidelong blow of the seventy-foot pine that he bore for a cudgel. Then, having cleared the wall, the colossus climbed over it into Vyones.

Roaring, chuckling, laughing like a maniacal Cyclops, he strode along the narrow streets between houses that rose only to his waist, trampling without mercy everyone who could not escape in time, and smashing in the roofs with stupendous blows of his bludgeon. With a push of his left hand he broke off the protruding gables, and overturned the church steeples with

their bells clanging in dolorous alarm as they went down. A woeful shrieking and wailing of hysteria-laden voices accompanied his passing.

Straight towards the cathedral he came, as Gaspard had calculated, feeling that the high edifice would be made the special butt of his malevolence.

The streets were now emptied of people; but, as if to hunt them out and crush them in their hiding-places, the giant thrust his cudgel like a battering-ram through walls and windows and roofs as he went by. The ruin and havoc that he left was indescribable.

Soon he loomed opposite the cathedral tower on which Gaspard waited behind the gargoyle. His head was level with the tower, and his eyes flamed like wells of burning brimstone as he drew near. His lips were parted over stalactitic fangs in a hateful snarl; and he cried out in a voice like the rumbling of articulate thunder:

“Ho! Ye puling priests and devotees of a powerless God! Come forth and bow to Nathaire the master, before he sweeps you into limbo!”

It was then that Gaspard, with a hardihood beyond comparison, rose from his hiding-place and stood in full view of the raging colossus.

“Draw nearer, Nathaire, if indeed it be you, foul robber of tombs and charnels,” he taunted. “Come close, for I would hold speech with you.”

A monstrous look of astonishment dimmed the diabolic rage on the colossal features. Peering at Gaspard as if in doubt or incredulity, the giant lowered his lifted cudgel and stepped close to the tower, till his face was only a few feet from the intrepid student. Then, when he had apparently convinced himself of Gaspard’s identity, the look of maniacal wrath returned, flooding his eyes with Tartarean fire and twisting his lineaments into a mask of Apollyon-like malignity. His left arm came up in a prodigious arc, with twitching fingers that poised horribly above the head of

the youth, casting upon him a vulture-black shadow in the full-risen sun. Gaspard saw the white, startled faces of the necromancer's pupils, peering over his shoulder from their plank-built basket.

"Is it you, Gaspard, my recreant pupil?" the colossus roared stormily. "I thought you were rotting in the oubliette beneath Ylourgne — and now I find you perched atop of this accursed cathedral which I am about to demolish! ... You had been far wiser to remain where I left you, my good Gaspard."

His breath, as he spoke, blew like a charnel-polluted gale on the student. His vast fingers, with blackened nails like shovelblades, hovered in ogreish menace. Gaspard had furtively loosened his leathern pouch that hung at his belt, and had untied its mouth. Now, as the twitching fingers descended towards him, he emptied the contents of the pouch in the giant's face, and the fine powder, mounting in a dark-grey cloud, obscured the snarling lips and palpitating nostrils from his view.

Anxiously he watched the effect, fearing that the powder might be useless after all, against the superior arts and Satanical resources of Nathaire. But miraculously, as it seemed, the evil lambence died in the pit-deep eyes, as the monster inhaled the flying cloud. His lifted hand, narrowly missing the crouching youth in its sweep, fell lifelessly at his side. The anger was erased from the mighty, contorted mask, as if from the face of a dead man; the great cudgel fell with a crash to the empty street; and with drowsy, lurching steps, and listless, hanging arms, the giant turned his back to the cathedral and retraced his way through the devastated city.

He muttered dreamily to himself as he went; and people who heard him swore that the voice was no longer the awful, thunderswollen voice of Nathaire, but the tones and accents of a multitude of men, amid which the voices of certain of the ravished dead were recognizable. And the voice of

Nathaire himself, no louder now than in life, was heard at intervals through the manifold mutterings, as if protesting angrily.

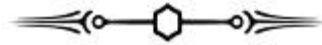
Climbing the eastern wall as it had come, the colossus went to and fro for many hours, no longer wreaking a hellish wrath and rancour, but searching, as people thought, for the various tombs and graves from which the hundreds of bodies that composed it had been so foully reft. From charnel to charnel, from cemetery to cemetery it went, through all the land; but there was no grave anywhere in which the dead colossus could lie down.

Then, towards evening, men saw it from afar on the red rim of the sky, digging with its hands in the soft, loamy plain beside the river Isoile. There, in a monstrous and self-made grave, the colossus laid itself down, and did not rise again. The ten pupils of Nathaire, it was believed, unable to descend from their basket, were crushed beneath the mighty body; for none of them was ever seen thereafter.

For many days no one dared to approach the place where the corpse lay uncovered in its self-dug grave. And so the thing rotted prodigiously beneath the summer sun, breeding a mighty stench that wrought pestilence in that portion of Averoigne. And they who ventured to go near in the following autumn, when the stench had lessened greatly, swore that the voice of Nathaire, still protesting angrily, was heard by them to issue from the enormous, rook-haunted bulk.

Of Gaspard du Nord, who had been the saviour of the province, it was related that he lived in much honour to a ripe age, being the one sorcerer of that region who at no time incurred the disapprobation of the Church.

The Satyr



RAOUL, COMTE DE la Frenaie, was by nature the most unsuspecting of husbands. His lack of suspicion, perhaps, was partly lack of imagination; and, for the rest, was doubtless due to the dulling of his observational faculties by the heavy wines of Averoine. At any rate, he had never seen anything amiss in the friendship of his wife, Adele, with Olivier du Montoir, a young poet who might in time have rivalled Ronsard as one of the most brilliant luminaries of the Pleiade, if it had not been for an unforeseen but fatal circumstance. Indeed, M. le Comte had been rather proud than otherwise, because of the interest shown in Mme. la Comtesse by this erudite and comely youth, who had already moistened his lips at the fount of Helicon and was becoming known throughout other provinces than Averoine for his melodious villanelles and graceful ballades. Nor was Raoul disturbed by the fact that many of these same villanelles and ballades were patently written in celebration of Adele's visible charms, and made liberal mention of her wine-dark tresses, her golden eyes, and sundry other details no less alluring, and equally essential to feminine perfection. M. le Comte did not pretend to understand poetry: like many others, he considered it something apart from all common sense or mundane relevancy; and his mental powers became totally paralysed whenever they were confronted by anything in rhyme and metre. In the meanwhile, the ballades and their author were gradually waxing in boldness.

That year, the snows of an austere winter had melted away in a week of halcyon warmth; and the land was filled with the tender green and

chrysolite and chrysoprase of early spring. Olivier came oftener and oftener to the chateau de la Frenaie, and he and Adele were often alone, since they had so much to talk that was beyond the interests or the comprehension of M. le Comte. And now, sometimes, they walked abroad in the forest about the chateau the forest that rolled a sea of vernal verdure almost to the grey walls and barbican, and within whose sun-warm glades the perfume of the first wild flowers was tingeing delicately the quiet air. If people gossiped, they did so discreetly and beyond hearing of Raoul, or of Adele and Olivier.

All things being as they were, it is hard to know just why M. le Comte became suddenly troubled concerning the integrity of his marital honour. Perhaps, in some interim of the hunting and drinking between which he divided nearly all his time, he had noticed that his wife was growing younger and fairer and was blooming as a woman never blooms except to the magical sunlight of love. Perhaps he had caught some glance of ardent or affectionate understanding between Adele and Olivier; or, perhaps, it was the influence of the premature spring, which had pierced the vinous muddlement of his brain with an obscure stirring of forgotten thoughts and emotions, and thus had given him a flash of insight. At any rate, he was troubled when, on this afternoon of earliest April, he returned to the chateau from Vyones, where he had gone on business, and learned from his servitors that Mme. la Comtesse and Olivier du Montoir had left a few minutes previously for a promenade in the forest. His dull face, however, betrayed little. He seemed to reflect for a moment. Then:

‘Which way did they go? I have reason to see Mme. la Comtesse at once.’

His servants gave him the required direction, and he went out, following slowly the footpath they had indicated, till he was beyond sight of the

chateau. Then he quickened his pace, and began to finger the hilt of his rapier as he went on through the thickening woods.

‘I am a little afraid, Olivier. Shall we go any farther?’

Adele and Olivier had wandered beyond the limits of their customary stroll, and were nearing a portion of the forest of Averoigne where the trees were older and taller than all others. Here, some of the huge oaks were said to date back to pagan days. Few people ever passed beneath them; and queer beliefs and legends concerning them had been prevalent among the local peasantry for ages. Things had been seen within these precincts, whose very existence was an affront to science and a blasphemy to religion; and evil influences were said to attend those who dared to intrude upon the sullen umbrage of the immemorial glades and thickets. The beliefs varied, and the legends were far from explicit; but all agreed that the wood was haunted by some entity inimical to man, some primordial spirit of ill that was ancients than Christ or Satan. Panic, madness, demoniac possession, or baleful, unreasoning passions that led them to doom, were the lot of all who had trodden the demesnes of this entity. There were those who whispered what the spirit was, who told incredible tales regarding its true nature, and described its true aspect; but such tales were not meet for the ear of devout Christians.

‘Prithee, let us go on,’ said Olivier. ‘Look you, Madame, and see how the ancient trees have put on the emerald freshness of April, how innocently they rejoice in the sun’s return.’

‘But the stories people tell, Olivier.’

‘They are stories to frighten children. Let us go on. There is nothing to harm us here, but much of beauty to enchant.’

Indeed, as he had said, the great-limbed oaks and venerable beeches were fresh with their new-born foliage. The forest wore an aspect of

blitheness and vertumnal gaiety, and it was hard to believe the old superstitions and legends. The day was one of those days when hearts that feel the urgency of an unavowed love are fain to wander indefinitely. So, after certain feminine demurs, and many reassurances, Adele allowed Olivier to persuade her, and they went on.

The feet of animals, if not of men, had continued the path they were following, and had made an easy way into the wood of fabulous evil. The drooping boughs enfolded them with arms of soft verdure, and seemed to draw them in; and shafts of yellow sunshine rifted the high trees, to aureole the lovely secret lilies that bloomed about the darkly writhing coils of enormous roots. The trees were twisted and knotted, were heavy with centurial incrustations of bark, were humped and misshapen with the growth of unremembered years; but there was an air of antique wisdom about them, together with a tranquil friendliness. Adele exclaimed with delight; and neither she nor Olivier was aware of anything sinister or doubtful in the unison of exquisite beauty and gnarled quaintness which the old forest offered to them.

‘Was I not right?’ Olivier queried. ‘Is there ought to fear in harmless trees and flowers?’

Adele smiled, but made no other answer. In the circle of bright sunlight where they were now standing, she and Olivier looked at each other with a new and pervasive intimacy. There was a strange perfume on the windless air, coming in slow wafts from an undiscernible source — a perfume that seemed to speak insidiously of love and langour and amorous yielding. Neither knew the flower from which it issued, for all at once there were many unfamiliar blossoms around their feet, with heavy bells of carnal white or pink, or curled and twining petals, or hearts like a rosy wound. Looking, they saw each other as in a sudden dazzle of flame; and each felt a

violent quickening of the blood, as if they had drunk a sovereign philtre. The same thought was manifest in the bold fervour of Olivier's eyes, and the modest flush upon the cheeks of Mme. la Comtesse. The long-cherished love, which neither had openly declared up to this hour, was clamouring importunately in the veins of both. They resumed their onward walk; and both were now silent through the self-same feeling of embarrassment and constraint.

They dared not look at each other; and neither of them had eyes for the changing character of the wood through which they wandered; and neither saw the foul, obscene deformity of the grey boles that gathered on each hand, or the shameful and monstrous fungi that reared their spotted pallor in the shade, or the red, venerous flowers that flaunted themselves in the sun. The spell of their desire was upon the lovers; they were drugged with the mandragora of passion; and everything beyond their own bodies, their own hearts, the throbbing of their own delirious blood, was vaguer than a dream.

The wood grew thicker and the arching boughs above were a weft of manifold gloom. The eyes of ferine animals peered from their hidden burrows, with gleams of crafty crimson or chill, ferocious beryl; and the dank smell of stagnant waters, choked with the leaves of bygone autumn, arose to greet Adele and Olivier, and to break a' little the perilous charm that possessed them.

They paused on the edge of a rock-encircled pool, above which the ancient alders twined their decaying tops, as if to maintain forever the mad posture of a superannuate frenzy. And there, between the nether boughs of the alders in a frame of new leaves, they saw the face that leered upon them.

The apparition was incredible; and, for the space of a long breath, they could not believe they had really seen it. There were two horns in a matted mass of coarse, animal-like hair above the semi-human face with its

obliquely slitted eyes and fang-revealing mouth and beard of wild-boar bristles. The face was old — incomputably old; and its lines and wrinkles were those of unreckoned years of lust; and its look was filled with the slow, unceasing increment of all the malignity and corruption and cruelty of elder ages. It was the face of Pan, as he glared from his, secret wood upon travellers taken unaware.

Adele and Olivier were seized by a nightmare terror, as they: recalled the old legends. The charm of their passionate obsession was broken, and the drug of desire relinquished its hold on their senses. Like people awakened from a heavy sleep, they saw the face, and heard through the tumult of their blood the cachinnation of a wild and evil and panic laughter, as the apparition vanished among the boughs.

Shuddering, Adele flung herself for the first time into the arms of her lover.

‘Did you see it?’ she whispered, as she clung to him.

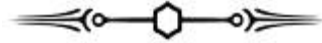
Olivier drew her close. In that delicious nearness, the horrible thing he had seen and heard became somehow improbable and unreal. There must have been a double sorcery abroad, to lull his horror thus; but he knew not whether the thing had been a momentary hallucination, a fantasy wrought by the sun amid the alder-leaves, or the demon that was fabled to dwell in Averroigne; and the startlement he had felt was somehow without meaning or reason. He could even thank the apparition, whatever it was, because it had thrown Adele into his embrace. He could think of nothing now but the proximity of that warm, delectable mouth, for which he had hungered so long. He began to reassure her, to make light of her fears, to pretend that she could have seen nothing; and his reassurances merged into ardent protestations of love. He kissed her... and they both forgot the vision of the satyr...

They were lying on a patch of golden moss, where the sunrays fell through a single cleft in the high foliage, when Raoul found them. They did not see or hear him, as he paused and stood with drawn rapier before the vision of their unlawful happiness.

He was about to fling himself upon them and impale the two with a single thrust where they lay, when an unlooked-for and scarce conceivable thing occurred. With swiftness veritably supernatural, a brown hairy creature, a being that was not wholly man, not wholly animal, but some hellish mixture of both, sprang from amid the alder branches and snatched Adele from Olivier's embrace. Olivier and Raoul saw it only in one fleeting glimpse, and neither could have described it clearly afterwards. But the face was that which had leered upon the lovers from the foliage; and the shaggy' legs and body were those of a creature of antique legend. It disappeared as incredibly as it had come, bearing the woman in its arms; and her shrieks of terror were surmounted by the pealing of its mad, diabolical laughter.

The shrieks and laughter died away at some distant remove in the green silence of the forest, and were not followed by any other sound. Raoul and Olivier could only stare at each other in complete stupefaction.

The Garden of Adompha



“Lord of the sultry, red parterres
And orchards sunned by hell’s unsetting flame!
Amid thy garden blooms the Tree which bears
Unnumbered heads of demons for its fruit;
And, like a slithering serpent, runs the root
That is called Baaras;
And there the forky, pale mandragoras,
Self-torn from out the soil, go to and fro,
Calling upon thy name:
Till man new-damned will deem that devils pass,
Crying in wrathful frenzy and strange woe.”

Ludar’s Litany to Thasaidon

IT WAS WELL known that Adompha, king of the wide orient isle of Sotar, possessed amid his far-stretching palace grounds a garden secret from all men except himself and the court magician, Dwerulas. The square-built granite walls of the garden, high and formidable as those of a prison, were plain for all to see, rearing above the stately beefwood and camphor trees, and broad plots of multi-coloured blossoms. But nothing had ever been ascertained regarding its interior: for such care as it required was given only by the wizard beneath Adompha’s direction; and the twain spoke thereof in deep riddles that none could interpret. The thick brazen door responded to a mechanism whose mystery they shared with none other; and the king and Dwerulas, whether separately or together, visited the garden only at those

hours when others were not abroad. And none could verily boast that he had beheld even so much as the opening of the door.

Men said that the garden had been roofed over against the sun with great sheets of lead and copper, leaving no cranny through which the tiniest star could peer down. Some swore that the privacy of its masters during their visits was ensured by a lethean slumber which Dwerulas, through his magic art, was wont to lay at such times upon the whole vicinity.

A mystery so salient could hardly fail to provoke curiosity, and sundry different beliefs arose concerning the garden's nature. Some averred that it was filled with evil plants of nocturnal habit, that yielded their swift and mordant poisons for Adompha's use, along with more insidious and baleful essences employed by the warlock in the working of his enchantments. Such tales, it seemed, were perhaps not without authority: since, following the construction of the closed garden, there had been at the royal court numerous deaths attributable to poisoning, and disasters that were plainly the sendings of a wizard, together with the bodily vanishment of people whose mundane presence no longer pleased Adompha or Dwerulas.

Other tales, of a more extravagant kind, were whispered among the credulous. That legend of unnatural infamy, which had surrounded the king from childhood, assumed a more hideous tinge; and Dwerulas, who had reputedly been sold to the Archdemon before birth by his haggish mother, acquired a new blackness of renown as one exceeding all other sorcerers in the depth and starkness of his abandonment.

Waking from such slumber and such dreams as the juice of the black poppy had given him, King Adompha rose in the dead, stagnant hours between moonset and dawn. About him the palace lay hushed like a charnel-house, its occupants having yielded to their nightly sopor of wine, drugs and arrack. Around the palace, the gardens and the capital city of

Loithé slept beneath slow stars of windless southern heavens. At this time Adompha and Dwerulas were wont to visit the high-walled close with little fear of being followed or observed.

Adompha went forth, pausing but briefly to turn the covert eye of his black bronze lantern into the lampless chamber adjoining his own. The room had been occupied by Thuloneah, his favourite odalisque for the seldom-equalled period of eight nights; but he saw without surprise or disconcertion that the bed of disordered silks was now empty. By this, he felt sure that Dwerulas had preceded him to the garden. And he knew, moreover, that Dwerulas had not gone idly or unburdened.

The grounds of the palace, steeped everywhere in unbroken shadow, appeared to maintain that secrecy which the king preferred. He came to the shut brazen door in the blankly towering wall; emitting, as he approached it, a sharp sibilation like the hissing of a cobra. In response to the rising and falling of this sound, the door swung inwards silently and closed silently behind him.

The garden, planted and tilled so privily, and sealed by its metal roof from the orbs of heaven, was illumined solely by a strange, fiery globe that hung in mid-air at the centre. Adompha regarded this globe with awe, for its nature and purveyance were mysterious to him. Dwerulas claimed that it had risen from hell on a moonless midnight at his bidding, and was levitated by infernal power, and fed with the never-dying flames of that clime in which the fruits of Thasaidon swelled to unearthly size and enchanted savour. It gave forth a sanguine light, in which the garden swam and weltered as if seen through a luminous mist of blood. Even in the bleak nights of winter, the globe yielded a genial warmth; and it fell never from its weird suspension, though without palpable support; and beneath it the

garden flourished balefully, lush and exuberant as same parterre of the nether circles.

Indeed, the growths of that garden were such as no terrestrial sun could have fostered, and Dwerulas said that their seed was of like origin with the globe. There were pale, bifurcated trunks that strained upwards as if to disroot themselves from the ground, unfolding immense leaves like the dark and ribbed wings of dragons. There were amaranthine blossoms, broad as salvers, supported by arm-thick stems that trembled continually.

And there were many other weird plants, diverse as the seven hells, and having no common characteristics other than the scions which Dwerulas had grafted upon them here and there through his unnatural and necromantic art.

These scions were the various parts and members of human beings. Consummately, and with never failing success, the magician had joined them to the half-vegetable, half-animate stocks on which they lived and grew thereafter, drawing an ichor-like sap. Thus were preserved the carefully chosen souvenirs of a multitude of persons who had inspired Dwerulas and the king with distaste or ennui. On palmy boles, beneath feathery-tufted foliage, the heads of eunuchs hung in bunches, like enormous black drupes. A bare, leafless creeper was flowered with the ears of delinquent guardsmen. Misshapen cacti were fruited with the breasts of women, or foliated with their hair. Entire limbs or torsos had been united with monstrous trees. Some of the huge salver-like blossoms bore palpitating hearts, and certain smaller blooms were centered with eyes that still opened and closed amid their lashes. And there were other graftings, too obscene or repellent for narration.

Adompha went forward among the hybrid growths, which stirred and rustled at his approach. The heads appeared to crane towards him a little,

the ears quivered, the breasts shuddered lightly, the eyes widened or narrowed as if watching his progress.

These human remnants, he knew, lived only with the sluggish life of the plants, shared only in their sub-animal activity. He had regarded them with a curious and morbid esthetic pleasure, had found in them the infallible attraction of things enormous and hypernatural. Now, for the first time, he passed among them with a languid interest. He began to apprehend that fatal hour when the garden, with all its novel thaumaturgies, would offer no longer a refuge from his inexorable ennui.

At the core of the strange pleasance, where a circular space was still vacant amid the crowding growths, Adompha came to a mound of loamy fresh-dug earth. Beside it, wholly nude, and supine as if in death, there lay the odalisque Thuloneah. Near her, various knives, and other implements, together with vials of liquid balsams and viscid gums that Dwerulas used in his grafting, had been emptied upon the ground from a leathern bag. A plant known as the dedaim, with a bulbous, pulpy, whitishgreen bole from whose centre rose and radiated several leafless reptilian boughs, dripped upon Thuloneah's bosom an occasional drop of yellowish-red ichor from incisions made in its smooth bark.

Behind the loamy mound, Dwerulas rose to view with the suddenness of a demon emerging from his subterrene lair. In his hands he held the spade with which he had just finished digging a deep and grave-like hole. Beside the regal stature and girth of Adompha, he seemed no more than a wizened dwarf. His aspect bore all the marks of immense age, as if dusty centuries had seared his flesh and sucked the blood from his veins. His eyes glowed in the bottom of pit-like orbits; his features were black and sunken as those of a long-dead corpse; his body was gnarled as some millennial desert cedar. He stooped incessantly so that his lank knotty arms hung almost to the

ground. Adompha marvelled, as always, at the well-nigh demoniac strength of those arms; marvelled that Dwerulas could have wielded the heavy shovel so expeditiously, could have carried to the garden on his back without human aid the burden of those victims whose members he had utilized in his experiments. The king had never demeaned himself to assist at such labours; but, after indicating from time to time the people whose disappearance would in no wise displease him, had done nothing more than watch and supervise the baroque gardening.

‘Is she dead?’ Adompha questioned, eyeing the luxurious limbs and body of Thuloneah without emotion.

‘Nay,’ said Dwerulas, in a voice harsh as a rusty coffin-hinge, ‘but I have administered to her the drowsy and over-powering juice of the dedaim. Her heart beats impalpably, her blood flows with the sluggishness of that mingled ichor. She will not reawaken... save as a part of the garden’s life, sharing its obscure sentience. I wait now your further instructions. What portion... or portions?’

‘Her hands were very deft,’ said Adompha as if musing aloud, in reply to the half-uttered question ‘They knew the subtle ways of love and were learned in all amorous arts. I would have you preserve her hands... but nothing else.’

The singular and magical operation had been completed. The fair, slim, tapering hands of Thuloneah, severed cleanly at the wrists, were attached with little mark of suture to the pale and lopped extremities of the two topmost branches of the dedaim. In this process the magician had employed the gums of infernal plants, and had repeatedly invoked the curious powers of certain underground genii, as was his wont on such occasions. Now, as if in suppliance, the semi-vegetable arms reached out towards Adompha with their human hands. The king felt a revival of his old interest in Dwerulas’

horticulture, a queer excitement woke within him before the mingled grotesquery and beauty of the grafted plant. At the same time there lived again in his flesh the subtle ardours of outworn nights... for the hands were filled with memories.

He had quite forgotten Thuloneah's body, lying close by with its maimed arms. Recalled from his reverie by the sudden movement of Dwerulas, he turned and saw the wizard stooping above the unconscious girl; who had not stirred during the whole course of the operation. Blood still flowed and puddled upon the dark earth from the stumps of her wrists. Dwerulas, with that unnatural vigour which informed all his movements, seized the odalisque in his pipy arms and swung her easily aloft. His air was that of a labourer resuming his unfinished task; but he seemed to hesitate before casting her into the hole that would serve as a grave; where, through seasons warmed and illumined by the hell-drawn globe, her golden, decaying body would feed the roots of that anomalous plant which bore her own hands for scions. It was as if he were loath to relinquish his voluptuous burden. Adompha, watching him curiously, was aware as never before of the stark evil and turpitude that flowed like an overwhelming fetor from Dwerulas' hunched body and twisted limbs.

Deeply as he himself had gone into all manner of iniquities, the king felt a vague revulsion. Dwerulas reminded him of a loathsome insect that he had once surprised during its ghoulish activities. He remembered how he had crushed the insect with a stone... and remembering, he conceived one of those bold and sudden inspirations that had always impelled him to equally sudden action. He had not, he told himself, entered the garden with any such thought: but the opportunity was too urgent and too perfect to be overpassed. The wizard's back was turned to him for the nonce; the arms of the wizard were encumbered with their heavy and pulchritudinous load.

Snatching up the iron spade, Adompha brought it down on the small, withered head of Dwerulas with a fair amount of war-like strength inherited from heroic and piratic ancestors. The dwarf, still carrying Thuloneah, toppled forward into the deep pit.

Posing the spade for a second blow if such should be necessary, the king waited; but there was neither sound nor movement from the grave. He felt a certain surprise at having overcome with such ease the formidable magician, of whose superhuman powers he was half convinced; a certain surprise, too, at his own temerity. Then, reassured by his triumph, the king bethought him that he might try an experiment of his own: since he believed himself to have mastered much of Dwerulas' peculiar skill and lore through observation. The head of Dwerulas would form a unique and suitable addition to one of the garden plants. However, upon peering into the pit, he was forced to relinquish the idea: for he saw that he had struck only too well and had reduced the sorcerer's head to a state in which it was useless for his experiment, since such graftings required a certain integrity of the human part or member.

Reflecting, not without disgust, on the unlooked-for frailty of the skulls of magicians, which were as easily squashed as emus' eggs, Adompha began to fill the pit with loam. The prone body of Dwerulas, the huddled form of Thuloneah beneath it, sharing the same inertness, were soon covered from view by the soft and dissolving clods. The king, who had grown to fear Dwerulas in his heart, was aware of a distinct relief when he had tamped the grave down very firmly and had leveled it smoothly with the surrounding soil. He told himself that he had done well: for the magician's stock of learning had come latterly to include too many royal secrets; and power such as his, whether drawn from nature or from occult

realms, was never quite compatible with the secure dominion and prolonged empire of kings.

At King Adompha's court and throughout the sea-bordering city of Loithé, the vanishment of Dwerulas became the cause of much speculation but little inquiry. There was a division of opinion as to whether Adompha or the fiend Thasaidon could be thanked for so salutary a riddance; and in consequence, the king of Sotar and the lord of the seven hells were both feared and respected as never before. Only the most redoubtable of men or demons could have made away with Dwerulas, who was said to have lived through a whole millennium never sleeping for one night, and crowding all his hours with iniquities and sorceries of a sub-tartarean blackness.

Following the inhumation of Dwerulas, a dim sentiment of fear and horror, for which he could not altogether account, had prevented the king from revisiting the sealed garden. Smiling impassively at the wild rumours of the court, he continued his search for novel pleasures and violent or rare sensations. In this, however, he met with small success: it seemed that every path, even the most outré and tortuous, led only to the hidden precipice of boredom. Turning from strange loves and cruelties, from extravagant pomps and mad music; from the aphrodisiac censers of far-sought blossoms, the quaintly shapen breasts of exotic girls, he recalled with new longing those semi-animate floral forms that had been endowed by Dwerulas with the most provocative charms of women.

So, on a latter night, at an hour midway between moonfall and sunrise, when all the palace and the city of Loithé were plunged in sodden slumber, the king arose from beside his concubine; and went forth to the garden that was now secret from all men excepting himself.

In answer to the cobra-like sibilation, which alone could actuate its cunning mechanism, the door opened to Adompha and closed behind him.

Even as it closed, he grew aware that a singular change had come upon the garden during his absence. Burning with a bloodier light, a more torrid radiation, the mysterious air-hung globe glared down as it fanned by wrathful demons; and the plants, which had grown excessively in height, and were muffled and hooded with a heavier foliage than they had worn priorly, stood motionless amid an atmosphere that was like the heated breath of some crimson hell.

Adompha hesitated, doubtful of the meaning of these changes. For a moment he thought of Dwerulas, and recalled with a slight shiver certain unexplained prodigies and necromantic feats performed by the wizard... But he had slain Dwerulas and had buried him with his own royal hands. The waxing heat and radiance of that globe, the excessive growth of the garden, were no doubt due to some uncontrolled natural process.

Held by a strong curiosity, the king inhaled the giddy perfumes that came to assail his nostrils. The light dazzled his eyes filling them with queer, unheard-of colours; the heat smote upon him as if from a nether solstice of infernal summer. He thought that he heard voices, almost inaudible at first, but mounting anon to a half-articulate murmur that seduced his ear with unearthly sweetness. At the same time he seemed to behold amid the stirless vegetation, in flashing glimpses, the half-veiled limbs of dancing bayaderes; limbs that he could not identify with any of the graftings made by Dwerulas.

Drawn by the charm of mystery and seized by a vague intoxication, the king went forward into the hell-born labyrinth. The plants recoiled gently when he neared them, and drew back on either side to permit his passage. As if in arboreal masquerade, they seemed to hide their human scions behind the mantles of their new-grown leafage. Then, closing behind Adompha, they appeared to cast off their disguise, revealing wilder and

more anomalous fusions than he had remembered. They changed about him from instant to instant like shapes of delirium, so that he was never quite sure how much of their semblance was tree and flower, how much was woman and man. By turns he beheld a swinging of convulsed foliage, a commotion of riotous limbs and bodies. Then, by some undiscerned transition, it seemed that they were no longer rooted in the ground but were moving about him on dim, fantastic feet in ever-swiftening circles, like the dancers of some bewildering festival.

Around and around Adompha raced the forms that were both floral and human; till the dizzy madness of their motion swirled with an equal vertigo through his brain. He heard the sougling of a storm-driven forest, together with a clamouring of familiar voices that called him by name, that cursed or supplicated, mocked or exhorted, in myriad tones of warrior, councillor, slave, courtling, castrado or leman. Over all, the sanguine globe blazed down with an ever-brightening and more baleful effulgence, an ardour that became always more insupportable. It was as if the whole life of the garden turned and rose and flamed ecstatically to some infernal culmination.

King Adompha had lost all memory of Dwerulas and his dark magic. In his senses burned the ardour of the hell-risen orb, and he seemed to share the delirious motion and ecstasy of those obscure shapes by which he was surrounded. A mad ichor mounted in his blood; before him hovered the vague images of pleasures he had never known or suspected: pleasures in which he would pass far beyond the ordained limits of mortal sensation.

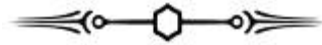
Then, amid that whirling fantasmagoria, he heard the screeching of a voice that was harsh as some rusty hinge on the lifted lid of a sarcophagus. He could not understand the words: but, as if a spell of stillness had been uttered, the whole garden resumed immediately a hushed and hooded aspect. The king stood in a very stupor: for the voice had been that of

Dwerulas! He looked about him wildly, bemazed and bewildered, seeing only the still plants with their mantling of profuse leafage. Before him towered a growth which he somehow recognized as the dedaim, though its bulb-shaped bole and elongated branches had put forth a matted mass of dark, hair-like filaments.

Very slowly and gently, the two topmost branches of the dedaim descended till their tips were level with Adompha's face. The slender, tapering hands of Thuloneah emerged from their foliage and began to caress the king's cheeks with that loverlike adroitness which he still remembered. At the same moment, he saw the thick hairy matting fall apart upon the broad and flattish top of the dedaim's bole; and from it, as if rearing from hunched shoulders, the small, wizened head of Dwerulas rose up, to confront him...

Still gazing in vacuous horror at the crushed and blood-clotted cranium, at the features seared and blackened as if by centuries, at the eyes that glowed in dark pits like embers blown by demons, Adompha had the confused impression of a multitude of people that hurled themselves upon him from every side. There were no longer any trees in that garden of mad minglings and sorcerous transformations. About him in the fiery air swam faces that he recalled only too well: faces now contorted with rage, and the lethal lust of revenge. Through an irony which Dwerulas alone could have conceived, the soft fingers of Thuloneah continued to caress him, while he felt the clutching of numberless hands that tore all his garments into rags and shredded all his flesh with their nails.

The Charnel God



“MORDIGGIAN IS THE god of Zul-Bha-Sair,” said the innkeeper with unctuous solemnity. “He has been the god from years that are lost to man’s memory in shadow deeper than the subterraneans of his black temple. There is no other god in Zul-Bha-Sair. And all who die within the walls of the city are sacred to Mordiggian. Even the kings and the optimates, at death, are delivered into the hands of his muffled priests. It is the law and the custom. A little while, and the priests will come for your bride.”

“But Elaith is not dead,” protested the youth Phariom for the third or fourth time, in piteous desperation. “Her malady is one that assumes the lying likeness of death. Twice before has she lain insensible, with a pallor upon her cheeks and a stillness in her very blood, that could hardly be distinguished from those of the tomb; and twice she has awakened after an interim of days.”

The innkeeper peered with an air of ponderous unbelief at the girl who lay white and motionless as a mown lily on the bed in the poorly furnished attic chamber.

“In that case you should not have brought her into Zul-Bha-Sair,” he averred in a tone of owlish irony. “The physician has pronounced her dead; and her death has been reported to the priests. She must go to the temple of Mordiggian.”

“But we are outlanders, guests of a night. We have come from the land of Xylac, far in the north; and this morning we should have gone on through Tasuun, toward Pharaad, the capital of Yoros, which lies near to the

southern sea. Surely your god could have no claim upon Elaith, even if she were truly dead.”

“All who die in Zul-Bha-Sair are the property of Mordiggian,” insisted the taverner sententiously. “Outlanders are not exempt. The dark maw of his temple yawns eternally, and no man, no child, no woman, throughout the years, has evaded its yawning. All mortal flesh must become, in due time, the provender of the god.”

Phariom shuddered at the oily and portentous declaration.

“Dimly have I heard of Mordiggian, as a legend that travellers tell in Xylac,” he admitted. “But I had forgotten the name of his city; and Elaith and I came ignorantly into Zul-Bha-Sair... Even had I known, I should have doubted the terrible custom of which you inform me...What manner of deity is this, who imitates the hyena and the vulture? Surely he is no god, but a ghoul.”

“Take heed lest you utter blasphemy,” admonished the innkeeper. “Mordiggian is old and omnipotent as death. He was worshipped in former continents, before the lifting of Zothique from out the sea. Through him, we are saved from corruption and the worm. Even as the people of other places devote their dead to the consuming flame, so we of Zul-Bha-Sair deliver ours to the god. Awful is the fane, a place of terror and obscure shadow untrod by the sun, into which the dead are borne by his priests and are laid on a vast table of stone to await his coming from the nether vault in which he dwells. No living men, other than the priests, have ever beheld him; and the faces of the priests are hidden behind masks of silver, and even their hands are shrouded, that men may not gaze on them that have seen Mordiggian.”

“But there is a king in Zul-Bha-Sair, is there not? I shall appeal to him against this heinous and horrible injustice. Surely he will heed me.”

“Phenquor is the king; but he could not help you even if he wished. Your appeal will not even be heard. Mordiggian is above all kings, and his law is sacred. Hark! — for already the priests come.”

Phariom, sick at heart with the charnel terror and cruelty of the doom that impended for his girlish wife in this unknown city of nightmare, heard an evil, stealthy creaking on the stairs that led to the attic of the inn. The sound drew nearer with inhuman rapidity, and four strange figures came into the room, heavily garbed in funereal purple, and wearing huge masks of silver graven in the likeness of skulls. It was impossible to surmise their actual appearance, for, even as the taverner had hinted, their very hands were concealed by fingerless gloves; and the purple gowns came down in loose folds that trailed about their feet like unwinding cerecloths. There was a horror about them, of which the macabre masks were only a lesser element; a horror that lay partly in their unnatural, crouching attitudes, and the beastlike agility with which they moved, unhampered by their cumbrous habiliments.

Among them, they carried a curious bier, made from interwoven strips of leather, and with monstrous bones that served for frame and handles. The leather was greasy and blackened as if from long years of mortuary use. Without speaking to Phariom or the innkeeper, and with no delay or formality of any sort, they advanced toward the bed on which Elaith was lying.

Undeterred by their more than formidable aspect, and wholly distraught with grief and anger, Phariom drew from his girdle a short knife, the only weapon he possessed. Disregarding the minatory cry of the taverner, he rushed wildly upon the muffled figures. He was quick and muscular, and, moreover, was clad in light, close-fitting raiment, such as would seemingly have given him a brief advantage.

The priests had turned their backs upon him; but, as if they had foreseen his every action, two of them wheeled about with the swiftness of tigers, dropping the handles of bone that they carried. One of them struck the knife from Phariom's hand with a movement that the eye could barely follow in its snaky darting. Then both assailed him, beating him back with terrible flailing blows of their shrouded arms, and hurling him half across the room into an empty corner. Stunned by his fall, he lay senseless for a term of minutes.

Recovering glazedly, with eyes that blurred as he opened them, he beheld the fact of the stout taverner stooping above him like a tallow-colored moon. The thought of Elaith, more sharp than the thrust of a dagger, brought him back to agonizing consciousness. Fearfully he scanned the shadowy room, and, saw that the ceremented priests were gone, that the bed was vacant. He heard the orotund and sepulchral croaking of the taverner.

"The priests of Mordiggian are merciful, they make allowance for the frenzy and distraction of the newly bereaved. It is well for you that they are compassionate, and considerate of mortal weakness."

Phariom sprang erect, as if his bruised and aching body were scorched by a sudden fire. Pausing only to retrieve his knife, which still lay in the middle of the room, he started toward the door. He was stopped by the hand of the hosteler, clutching greasily at his shoulder.

"Beware, lest you exceed the bounds of the mercy of Mordiggian. It is an ill thing to follow his priests — and a worse thing to intrude upon the deathly and sacred gloom of his temple."

Phariom scarcely heard the admonition. He wrenched himself hastily away from the odious fingers and turned to go; but again the hand clutched him.

“At least, pay me the money that you owe for food and lodging, ere you depart,” demanded the innkeeper. “Also, there is the matter of the physician’s fee, which I can settle for you, if you will entrust me with the proper sum. Pay now — for there is no surety that you will return.”

Phariom drew out the purse that contained his entire worldly wealth, and filled the greedily cupped palm before him with coins that he did not pause to count. With no parting word or backward glance, he descended the moldy and musty stairs of the worm-eaten hostelry, as if spurred by an incubus, and went out into the gloomy, serpentine streets of Zul-Bha-Sair.

Perhaps the city differed little from others, except in being older and darker; but to Phariom, in his extremity of anguish, the ways that he followed were like subterranean corridors that led only to some profound and monstrous charnel. The sun had risen above the overjutting houses, but it seemed to him that there was no light, other than a lost and doleful glimmering such as might descend into mortuary depths. The people, it may have been, were much like other people, but he saw them under a malefic aspect, as if they were ghouls and demons that went to and fro on the ghastly errands of a necropolis.

Bitterly, in his distraction, he recalled the previous evening, when he had entered Zul-Bha-Sair at twilight with Elaith, the girl riding on the one dromedary that had survived their passage of the northern desert, and he walking beside her, weary but content. With the rosy purple of afterglow upon its walls and cupolas, with the deepening golden eyes of its lit windows, the place had seemed a fair and nameless city of dreams, and they had planned to rest there for a day or two before resuming the long, arduous journey to Pharaad, in Yoros.

This journey had been undertaken only through necessity. Phariom, an impoverished youth of noble blood, had been exiled because of the political

and religious tenets of his family, which were not in accord with those of the reigning emperor, Caleppos. Taking his newly wedded wife, Phariom had set out for Yoros, where certain allied branches of the house to which he belonged had already established themselves, and would give him a fraternal welcome.

They had travelled with a large caravan of merchants, going directly southward to Tasuun. Beyond the borders of Xylac, amid the red sands of the Celotian waste, the caravan had been attacked by robbers, who had slain many of its members and dispersed the rest. Phariom and his bride, escaping with their dromedaries, had found themselves lost and alone in the desert, and, failing to regain the road toward Tasuun, had taken inadvertently another track, leading to Zul-Bha-Sair, a walled metropolis on the south-western verge of the waste, which their itinerary had not included.

Entering Zul-Bha-Sair, the couple had repaired for reasons of economy to a tavern in the humbler quarter. There, during the night, Elaith had been overcome by the third seizure of the cataleptic malady to which she was liable. The earlier seizures, occurring before her marriage to Phariom, had been recognized in their true character by the physicians of Xylac, and had been palliated by skillful treatment. It was hoped that the malady would not recur. The third attack, no doubt, had been induced by the fatigues and hardships of the journey. Phariom had felt sure that Elaith would recover, but a doctor of Zul-Bha-Sair, hastily summoned by the innkeeper, had insisted that she was actually dead; and, in obedience to the strange law of the city, had reported her without delay to the priests of Mordiggian. The frantic protests of the husband had been utterly ignored.

There was, it seemed, a diabolic fatality about the whole train of circumstances through which Elaith, still living, though with that outward aspect of the tomb which her illness involved, had fallen into the grasp of

the devotees of the charnel god. Phariom pondered this fatality almost to madness, as he strode with furious, aimless haste along the eternally winding and crowded streets.

To the cheerless information received from the taverner, he added, as he went on, more and more of the tardily remembered legends which he had heard in Xylac. Ill and dubious indeed was the renown of Zul-Bha-Sair, and he marvelled that he should have forgotten it, and cursed himself with black curses for the temporary but fatal forgetfulness. Better would it have been if he and Elaith had perished in the desert, rather than enter the wide gates that stood always open, gaping for their prey, as was the custom of Zul-Bha-Sair.

The city was a mart of trade, where outland travelers came, but did not care to linger, because of the repulsive cult of Mordiggian, the invisible eater of the dead, who was believed to share his provender with the shrouded priests. It was said that the bodies lay for days in the dark temple and were not devoured till corruption had begun. And people whispered of fouler things than necrophagism, of blasphemous rites that were solemnized in the ghoul-ridden vaults, and nameless uses to which the dead were put before Mordiggian claimed them. In all outlying places, the fate of those who died in Zul-Bha-Sair was a dreadful byword and a malediction. But to the people of that city, reared in the faith of the ghoulish god, it was merely the usual and expected mode of mortuary disposal. Tombs, graves, catacombs, funeral pyres, and other such nuisances, were rendered needless by this highly utilitarian deity.

Phariom was surprised to see the people of the city going about the common businesses of life. Porters were passing with bales of household goods upon their shoulders. Merchants were squatting in their shops like other merchants. Buyers and sellers chattered loudly in the public bazaars.

Women laughed and chattered in the door ways. Only by their voluminous robes of red, black and violet, and their strange, uncouth accents, was he able to distinguish the men of Zul-Bha-Sair from those who were outlanders like himself. The murk of nightmare began to lift from his impressions; and gradually, as he went on, the spectacle of everyday humanity all about him helped to calm a little his wild distraction and desperation. Nothing could dissipate the horror of his loss, and the abominable fate that threatened Elaith. But now, with a cool logic born of the cruel exigence, he began to consider the apparently hopeless problem of rescuing her from the ghoulish god's temple.

He composed his features, and constrained his febrile pacing to an idle saunter, so that none might guess the preoccupations that racked him inwardly. Pretending to be interested in the wares of a seller of men's apparel, he drew the dealer into converse regarding Zul-Bha-Sair and its customs, and made such inquiries as a traveler from far lands might make. The dealer was talkative, and Phariom soon learned from him the location of the temple of Mordiggian, which stood at the city's core. He also learned that the temple was open at all hours, and that people were free to come and go within its precincts. There were, however, no rituals of worship, other than certain private rites that were celebrated by the priesthood. Few cared to enter the fane, because of a superstition that any living person who intruded upon its gloom would return to it shortly as the provender of the god.

Mordiggian, it seemed, was a benign deity in the eyes of the inhabitants of Zul-Bha-Sair. Curiously enough, no definite personal attributes were ascribed to him. He was, so to speak, an impersonal force akin to the elements — a consuming and cleansing power, like fire. His hierophants were equally mysterious; they lived at the temple and emerged from it only

in the execution of their funeral duties. No one knew the manner of their recruiting, but many believed that they were both male and female, thus renewing their numbers from generation to generation with no ulterior commerce. Others thought that they were not human beings at all, but an order of subterranean earth-entities, who lived for ever, and who fed upon corpses like the god himself. Through this latter belief, of late years, a minor heresy had risen, some holding that Mordiggian was a mere hieratic figment, and the priests were the sole devourers of the dead. The dealer, quoting this heresy, made haste to disavow it with pious reprobation.

Phariom chatted for awhile on other topics, and then continued his progress through the city, going as forthrightly toward the temple as the obliquely running thoroughfares would permit. He had formed no conscious plan, but desired to reconnoitre the vicinage. In that which the garment-dealer had told him, the one reassuring detail was the openness of the fane and its accessibility to all who dared enter. The rarity of visitors, however, would make Phariom conspicuous, and he wished above all to avoid attention. On the other hand, any effort to remove bodies from the temple was seemingly unheard of — a thing audacious beyond the dreams of the people of Zul-Bha-Sair. Through the very boldness of his design, he might avoid suspicion, and succeed in rescuing Elaith.

The streets that he followed began to tend downward, and were narrower, dimmer and more tortuous than any he had yet traversed. He thought for awhile that he had lost his way, and he was about to ask the passersby to redirect him, when four of the priests of Mordiggian, bearing one of the curious litter-like biers of bone and leather, emerged from an ancient alley just before him.

The bier was occupied by the body of a girl, and for one moment of convulsive shock and agitation that left him trembling, Phariom thought

that the girl was Elaith. Looking again, he saw his mistake. The gown that the girl wore, though simple, was made of some rare exotic stuff. Her features, though pale as those of Elaith, were crowned with curls like the petals of heavy black poppies. Her beauty, warm and voluptuous even in death, differed from the blond pureness of Elaith as tropic lilies differ from narcissi.

Quietly, and maintaining a discreet interval, Phariom followed the sullenly shrouded figures and their lovely burden. He saw that people made way for the passage of the bier with awed, unquestioning alacrity; and the loud voices of hucksters and chafferers were hushed as the priests went by. Overhearing a murmured conversation between two of the townsfolk, he learned that the dead girl was Arctela, daughter of Quaos, a high noble and magistrate of Zul-Bha-Sair. She had died very quickly and mysteriously, from a cause unknown to the physicians, which had not marred or wasted her beauty in the least. There were those who held that an indetectable poison, rather than disease, had been the agency of death; and others deemed her the victim of malefic sorcery.

The priests went on, and Phariom kept them in sight as well as he could in the blind tangle of streets. The way steepened, without affording any clear prospect of the levels below, and the houses seemed to crowd more closely, as if huddling back from a precipice. Finally the youth emerged behind his macabre guides in a sort of circular hollow at the city's heart, where the temple of Mordiggian loomed alone and separate amid pavements of sad onyx, and funerary cedars whose green had blackened as if with the undeparting charnel shadows bequeathed by dead ages.

The edifice was built of a strange stone, hued as with the blackish purple of carnal decay: a stone that refused the ardent luster of noon, and the prodigality of dawn or sunset glory. It was low and windowless, having the

form of a monstrous mausoleum. Its portals yawned sepulchrally in the gloom of the cedars.

Phariom watched the priests as they vanished within the portals, carrying the girl Arctela like phantoms who bear a phantom burden. The broad area of pavement between the recoiling houses and the temple was now deserted, but he did not venture to cross it in the glare of betraying daylight. Circling the area, he saw that there were several other entrances to the great fane, all open and unguarded. There was no sign of activity about the place; but he shuddered at the thought of that which was hidden within its walls, even as the feasting of worms is hidden in the marble tomb.

Like a vomiting of charnels, the abominations of which he had heard rose up before him in the sunlight; and again he drew close to madness, knowing that Elaith must lie among the dead, in the temple, with the foul umbrage of such things upon her, and that he, consumed with unremitting frenzy, must wait for the favorable shrouding of darkness before he could execute his nebulous, doubtful plan of rescue. In the meanwhile, she might awake, and perish from the mortal horror of her surroundings... or worse even than this might befall, if the whispered tales were true...

Abnon-Tha, sorcerer and necromancer, was felicitating himself on the bargain he had made with the priests of Mordiggian. He felt, perhaps justly, that no one less clever than he could have conceived and executed the various procedures that had made possible this bargain, through which Arctela, daughter of the proud Quaos, would become his unquestioning slave. No other lover, he told himself, could have been resourceful enough to obtain a desired woman in this fashion. Arctela, betrothed to Alos, a young noble of the city, was seemingly beyond the aspiration of a sorcerer. Abnon-Tha, however, was no common hedge-wizard, but an adept of long standing in the most awful and profound arcana of the black arts. He knew

the spells that kill more quickly and surely than knife or poison, at a distance; and he knew also the darker spells by which the dead can be reanimated, even after years or ages of decay. He had slain Arctela in a manner that none could detect, with a rare and subtle invultuation that had left no mark; and her body lay now among the dead, in Mordiggian's temple. Tonight, with the tacit connivance of the terrible, shrouded priests, he would bring her back to life.

Abnon-Tha was not native to Zul-Bha-Sair, but had come many years before from the infamous, half-mythic isle of Sotar, lying somewhere to the east of the huge continent of Zothique. Like a sleek young vulture, he had established himself in the very shadow of the charnel fane, and had prospered, taking to himself pupils and assistants.

His dealings with the priests were long and extensive, and the bargain he had just made was far from being the first of its kind. They had allowed him the temporary use of bodies claimed by Mordiggian, stipulating only that these bodies should not be removed from the temple during the course of any of his experiments in necromancy. Since the privilege was slightly irregular from their viewpoint, he had found it necessary to bribe them — not, however, with gold, but with the promise of a liberal purveyance of matters more sinister and corruptible than gold. The arrangement had been satisfactory enough to all concerned: cadavers had poured into the temple with more than their usual abundance ever since the coming of the sorcerer; the god had not lacked for provender; and Abnon-Tha had never lacked for subjects on which to employ his more baleful spells.

On the whole, Abnon-Tha was not ill-pleased with himself. He reflected, moreover, that, aside from his mastery of magic and his sleightful ingenuity, he was about to manifest a well-nigh unexampled courage. He had planned a robbery that would amount to dire sacrilege: the removal of the

reanimated body of Arctela from the temple. Such robberies (either of animate or exanimate corpses) and the penalty attached to them, were a matter of legend only; for none had occurred in recent ages. Thrice terrible, according to common belief, was the doom of those who had tried and failed. The necromancer was not blind to the risks of his enterprise; nor, on the other hand, was he deterred or intimidated by them.

His two assistants, Narghai and Vemba-Tsith, apprised of his intention, had made with all due privacy the necessary preparations for their flight from Zul-Bha-Sair. The strong passion that the sorcerer had conceived for Arctela was not his only motive, perhaps, in removing from that city. He was desirous of change, for he had grown a little weary of the odd laws that really served to restrict his necromantic practices, while facilitating them in a sense. He planned to travel southward, and establish himself in one of the cities of Tasuun, an empire famous for the number and antiquity of its mummies.

It was now sunset-time. Five dromedaries, bred for racing, waited in the inner courtyard of Abnon-Tha's house, a high and moldering mansion that seemed to lean forward upon the open, circular area belonging to the temple. One of the dromedaries would carry a bale containing the sorcerer's most valuable books, manuscripts, and other impedimenta of magic. Its fellows would bear Abnon-Tha, the two assistants — and Arctela.

Narghai and Vemba-Tsith appeared before their master to tell him that all was made ready. Both were much younger than Abnon-Tha; but, like himself, they were outlanders in Zul-Bha-Sair. They came of the swart and narrow-eyed people of Naat, an isle that was little less infamous than Sotar.

"It is well," said the necromancer, as they stood before him with lowered eyes, after making their announcement. "We have only to await the favorable hour. Midway between sunset and moonrise, when the priests are

at their supper in the nether adytum, we will enter the temple and perform that which must be done for the rising of Arctela. They feed well tonight, for I know that many of the dead grow ripe on the great table in the upper sanctuary; and it may be that Mordiggian feeds also. None will come to watch us at our doings.”

“But, master,” said Narghai, shivering a little beneath his robe of nacarat red, “is it wise, after all, to do this thing? Must you take the girl from the temple? Always, ere this, you have contented yourself with the brief loan that the priests allow, and have rendered back the dead in the required state of exanimation. Truly, is it well to violate the law of the god? Men say that the wrath of Mordiggian, though seldom loosed, is more dreadful than the wrath of all other deities. For this reason, none has dared to defraud him in latter years, or attempt the removal of any of the corpses from his fane. Long ago, it is told, a high noble of the city bore hence the cadaver of a woman he had loved, and fled with it into the desert; but the priests pursued him, running more swiftly than jackals ...and the fate that overtook him is a thing whereof the legends whisper but dimly.”

“I fear neither Mordiggian nor his creatures,” said Abnon-Tha, with a solemn vainglory in his voice. “My dromedaries can outrun the priests — even granting that the priests are not men at all, but ghouls, as some say. And there is small likelihood that they will follow us: after their feasting tonight, they will sleep like gorged vultures. The morrow will find us far on the road to Tasuun, ere they awake.”

“The master is right,” interpolated Vemba-Tsith, “We have nothing to fear.”

“But they say that Mordiggian does not sleep,” insisted Narghai, “and that he watches all things eternally from his black vault beneath the temple.”

“So I have heard,” said Abnon-Tha, with a dry and learned air. “But I consider that such beliefs are mere superstition. There is nothing to confirm them in the real nature of corpse-eating entities. So far, I have never beheld Mordiggian, either sleeping or awake; but in all likelihood he is merely a common ghoul. I know these demons and their habits. They differ from hyenas only through their monstrous shape and size, and their immortality.”

“Still, I must deem it an ill thing to cheat Mordiggian,” muttered Narghai beneath his breath.

The words were caught by the quick ears of AbnonTha. “Nay, there is no question of cheating. Well have I served Mordiggian and his priesthood, and amply have I larded their black table. Also, I shall keep, in a sense, the bargain I have made concerning Arctela: the providing of a new cadaver in return for my necromantic privilege. Tomorrow, the youth Alos, the betrothed of Arctela, will lie in her place among the dead. Go now, and leave me, for I must devise the inward invultuation that will rot the heart of Alos, like a worm that awakens at the core of fruit.”

To Phariom, fevered and distraught, it seemed that the cloudless day went by with the sluggishness of a corpse-clogged river. Unable to calm his agitation, he wandered aimlessly through the thronged bazaars, till the western towers grew dark on a heaven of saffron flame, and the twilight rose like a gray and curdling sea among the houses. Then he returned to the inn where Elaith had been stricken, and claimed the dromedary which he had left in the tavern stables. Riding the animal through dim thoroughfares, lit only by the covert gleam of lamps or tapers from half-closed windows, he found his way once more to the city’s center.

The dusk had thickened into darkness when he came to the open area surrounding Mordiggian’s temple. The windows of mansions fronting the area were shut and lightless as dead eyes, and the fane itself, a colossal bulk

of gloom, was rayless as any mausoleum beneath the gathering stars. No one, it seemed, was abroad, and though the quietude was favorable to his project, Phariom shivered with a chill of deathly menace and desolation. The hoofs of his camel rang on the pavement with a startling and preternatural clangor, and he thought that the ears of hidden ghouls, listening alertly behind the silence, must surely hear them.

However, there was no stirring of life in that sepulchral gloom. Reaching the shelter of one of the thick groups of ancient cedars, he dismounted and tied the dromedary to a low-growing branch. Keeping among the trees, like a shadow among shadows, he approached the temple with infinite wariness, and circled it slowly, finding that its four doorways, which corresponded to the four quarters of the Earth, were all wide open, deserted, and equally dark. Returning at length to the eastern side, on which he had tethered his camel, he emboldened himself to enter the blackly gaping portal.

Crossing the threshold, he was engulfed instantly by a dead and clammy darkness, touched with the faint feter of corruption, and a smell as of charred bone and flesh. He thought that he was in a huge corridor, and feeling his way forward along the right-hand wall, he soon came to a sudden turn, and saw a bluish glimmering far ahead, as if in some central adytum where the hall ended. Massy columns were silhouetted against the glimmering; and across it, as he drew nearer, several dark and muffled figures passed, presenting the profiles of enormous skulls. Two of them were sharing the burden of a human body which they carried in their arms. To Phariom, pausing in the shadowy hall, it appeared that the vague taint of putrescence upon the air grew stronger for a few instants after the figure had come and gone.

They were not succeeded by any others, and the fane resumed its mausolean stillness. But the youth waited for many minutes, doubtful and

trepidant, before venturing to go on. An oppression of mortuary mystery thickened the air, and stifled him like the noisome effluvia of catacombs. His ears became intolerably acute, and he heard a dim humming, a sound of deep and viscid voices indistinguishably bent, that appeared to issue from crypts beneath the temple.

Stealing at length to the hall's end, he peered beyond into what was obviously the main sanctuary: a low and many-pillared room, whose vastness was but half-revealed by the bluish fires that glowed and flickered in numerous urnlike vessels borne aloft on slender stelae.

Phariom hesitated upon that awful threshold, for the mingled odors of burnt and decaying flesh were heavier on the air, as if he had drawn nearer to their sources; and the thick humming seemed to ascend from a dark stairway in the floor, beside the left-hand wall. But the room, to all appearance, was empty of life, and nothing stirred except the wavering lights and shadows. The watcher discerned the outlines of a vast table in the center, carved from the same black stone as the building itself. Upon the table, half lit by the flaming urns, or shrouded by the umbrage of the heavy columns, a number of people lay side by side; and Phariom knew that he had found the black altar of Mordiggian, whereon were disposed the bodies claimed by the god.

A wild and stifling fear contended with a wilder hope in his bosom. Trembling, he went toward the table; and a cold clamminess, wrought by the presence of the dead, assailed him. The table was nearly thirty feet in length, and it rose waist-high on a dozen mighty legs. Beginning at the nearer end, he passed along the row of corpses, peering fearfully into each upturned face. Both sexes, and many ages and differing ranks were represented. Nobles and rich merchants were crowded by beggars in filthy rags. Some were newly dead, and others, it seemed, had lain there for days,

and were beginning to show the marks of corruption. There were many gaps in the ordered row, suggesting that certain of the corpses had been removed. Phariom went on in the dim light, searching for the loved features of Elaith. At last, when he was nearing the further end, and had begun to fear that she was not among them, he found her.

With the cryptic pallor and stillness of her strange malady upon her, she lay unchanged on the chill stone. A great thankfulness was born in the heart of Phariom, for he felt sure that she was not dead — and that she had not awakened at any time to the horrors of the temple. If he could bear her away from the hateful purlieus of Zul-Bha-Sair without detection, she would recover from her death-simulating sickness.

Cursorily, he noted that another woman was lying beside Elaith, and recognized her as the beautiful Arctela, whose bearers he had followed almost to the portals of the fane. He gave her no second glance, but stooped to lift Elaith in his arms.

At that moment, he heard a murmur of low voices in the direction of the door by which he had entered the sanctuary. Thinking that some of the priests had returned, he dropped swiftly on hands and knees and crawled beneath the ponderous table, which afforded the only accessible hiding-place. Retreating into shadow beyond the glimmering shed from the lofty urns, he waited and looked out between the pillar-thick legs.

The voices grew louder, and he saw the curiously sandaled feet and shortish robes of three persons who approached the table of the dead and paused in the very spot where he himself had stood a few instants before. Who they were, he could not surmise; but their garments of light and swarthy red were not the shroudings of Mordiggian's priests. He was uncertain whether or not they had seen him; and crouching in the low space beneath the table, he plucked his dagger from its sheath.

Now, he was able to distinguish three voices, one solemn and unctuously imperative, one somewhat guttural and growling, and the other shrill and nasal. The accents were alien, differing from those of the men of Zul-Bha-Sair, and the words were often strange to Phariom. Also, much of the converse was inaudible.

“... here... at the end,” said the solemn voice. “Be swift... We have no time to loiter.”

“Yes, Master,” came the growling voice. “But who is this other?... Truly, she is very fair.”

A discussion seemed to take place, in discreetly lowered tones. Apparently the owner of the guttural voice was urging something that the other two opposed. The listener could distinguish only a word or two here and there; but he gathered that the name of the first person was Vembi-Tsith, and that the one who spoke in a nasal shrilling was called Narghai. At last, above the others, the grave accents of the man addressed only as the Master were clearly audible:

“I do not altogether approve... It will delay our departure... and the two must ride on one dromedary. But take her, Vemba-Tsith, if you can perform the necessary spells unaided. I have no time for a double incantation... It will be a good test of your proficiency.”

There was a mumbling as of thanks or acknowledgment from Vemba-Tsith. Then the voice of the Master: “Be quiet now and make haste.” To Phariom, wondering vaguely and uneasily as to the import of this colloquy, it seemed that two of the three men pressed closer to the table, as if stooping above the dead. He heard a rustling of cloth upon stone, and an instant later, he saw that all three were departing among the columns and stelae, in a direction opposite to that from which they had entered the sanctuary. Two of them carried burdens that glimmered palely and indistinctly in the shadows.

A black horror clutched at the heart of Phariom, for all too clearly he surmised the nature of those burdens and the possible identity of one of them. Quickly he crawled forth from his hiding-place and saw that Elaith was gone from the black table, together with the girl Arctela. He saw the vanishing of shadowy figures in the gloom that zoned the chamber's western wall. Whether the abductors were ghouls, or worse than ghouls, he could not know, but he followed swiftly, forgetful of all caution in his concern for Elaith.

Reaching the wall, he found the mouth of a corridor, and plunged into it headlong. Somewhere in the gloom ahead, he saw a ruddy glimmering of light. Then he heard a sullen, metallic grating; and the glimmer narrowed to a slit-like gleam, as if the door of the chamber from which it issued were being closed.

Following the blind wall, he came to that slit of crimson light. A door of darkly tarnished bronze had been left ajar, and Phariom peered in on a weird, unholy scene, illumined by the blood-like flames that flared and soared unsteadily from high urns upborne on sable pedestals.

The room was full of a sensuous luxury that accorded strangely with the dull, funereal stone of that temple of death. There were couches and carpets of superbly figured stuffs, vermilion, gold, azure, silver; and jeweled censers of unknown metals stood in the corners. A low table at one side was littered with curious bottles, and occult appliances such as might be used in medicine or sorcery.

Elaith was lying on one of the couches, and near her, on a second couch, the body of the girl Arctela had been disposed. The abductors, whose faces Phariom now beheld for the first time, were busying themselves with singular preparations that mystified him prodigiously. His impulse to invade

the room was repressed by a sort of wonder that held him enthralled and motionless.

One of the three, a tall, middle-aged man whom he identified as the Master, had assembled certain peculiar vessels, including a small brazier and a censer, and had set them on the floor beside Arctela. The second, a younger man with lecherously slitted eyes, had placed similar impedimenta before Elaith. The third, who was also young and evil of aspect, merely stood and looked on with an apprehensive, uneasy air.

Phariom divined that the men were sorcerers when, with a deftness born of long practice, they lit the censers and braziers, and began simultaneously the intonation of rhythmically measured words in a strange tongue accompanied by the sprinkling, at regular intervals, of black oils that fell with a great hissing on the coals in the braziers and sent up enormous clouds of pearly smoke. Dark threads of vapor serpented from the censers, interweaving themselves like veins through the dim, misshapen figures as of ghostly giants that were formed by the lighter fumes. A reek of intolerably acrid balsams filled the chamber, assailing and troubling the senses of Phariom, till the scene wavered before him and took on a dreamlike vastness, a narcotic distortion.

The voices of the necromancers mounted and fell as if in some unholy paeon. Imperious, exigent, they seemed to implore the consummation of forbidden blasphemy. Like thronging phantoms, writhing and swirling with malignant life, the vapors rose about the couches on which lay the dead girl and the girl who bore the outward likeness of death.

Then, as the fumes were riven apart in their baleful seething, Phariom saw that the pale figure of Elaith had stirred like a sleeper who awakens, that she had opened her eyes and was lifting a feeble hand from the gorgeous couch. The younger necromancer ceased his chanting on a sharply

broken cadence; but the solemn tones of the other still went on, and still there was a spell on the limbs and senses of Phariom, making it impossible for him to stir.

Slowly the vapors thinned like a rout of dissolving phantoms. The watcher saw that the dead girl, Arctela, was rising to her feet like a somnambulist. The chanting of Abnon-Tha, standing before her, came sonorously to an end. In the awful silence that followed, Phariom heard a weak cry from Elaith, and then the jubilant, growling voice of Vemba-Tsith, who was stooping above her:

“Behold, O Abnon-Tha! My spells are swifter than yours, for she that I have chosen awakened before Arctela!”

Phariom was released from his thralldom, as if through the lifting of an evil enchantment. He flung back the ponderous door of darkened bronze, that ground with protesting clangors on its hinges. His dagger drawn, he rushed into the room.

Elaith, her eyes wide with piteous bewilderment, turned toward him and made an ineffectual effort to arise from the couch. Arctela, mute and submissive before Abnon-Tha, appeared to heed nothing but the will of the necromancer. She was like a fair and soulless automaton. The sorcerers, turning as Phariom entered, sprang back with instant agility before his onset, and drew the short, cruelly crooked swords which they all carried. Narghai struck the knife from Phariom’s fingers with a darting blow that shattered its thin blade at the hilt, and Vemba-Tsith, his weapon swinging back in a vicious arc, would have killed the youth promptly if Abnon-Tha had not intervened and bade him stay.

Phariom, standing furious but irresolute before the lifted swords, was aware of the darkly searching eyes of Abnon-Tha, like those of some nyctalopic bird of prey.

“I would know the meaning of this intrusion,” said the necromancer. “Truly, you are bold to enter the temple of Mordiggian.”

“I came to find the girl who lies yonder,” declared Phariom. “She is Elaith, my wife, who was claimed unjustly by the god. But tell me, why have you brought her to this room, from the table of Mordiggian, and what manner of men are you, that raise up the dead as you have raised this other woman?”

“I am Abnon-Tha, the necromancer, and these others are my pupils, Narghai and Vemba-Tsith. Give thanks to Vemba-Tsith, for verily he has brought back your wife from the purlieus of the dead with a skill excelling that of his master. She awoke ere the incantation was finished!”

Phariom glared with implacable suspicion at Abnon-Tha. “Elaith was not dead, but only as one in a trance,” he averred. “It was not your pupil’s sorcery that awakened her. And verily whether Elaith be dead or living is not a matter that should concern any but myself. Permit us to depart, for I wish to remove with her from Zul-Bha-Sair, in which we are only passing travelers.”

So speaking, he turned his back on the necromancers, and went over to Elaith, who regarded him with dazed eyes but uttered his name feebly as he clasped her in his arms.

“Now, this is a remarkable coincidence,” purred Abnon-Tha. “I and my pupils are also planning to depart from Zul-Bha-Sair, and we start this very night. Perhaps you will honor us with your company.”

“I thank you,” said Phariom, curtly. “But I am not sure that our roads lie together. Elaith and I would go toward Tasuun.”

“Now, by the black altar of Mordiggian, that is still stranger coincidence, for Tasuun is also our destination. We take with us the resurrected girl Arctela, whom I have deemed too fair for the charnel god and his ghouls.”

Phariom divined the dark evil that lay behind the oily, mocking speeches of the necromancer. Also, he saw the furtive and sinister sign that Abnon-Tha had made to his assistants. Weaponless, he could only give a formal assent to the sardonic proposal. He knew well that he would not be permitted to leave the temple alive, for the narrow eyes of Narghai and Vemba-Tsith, regarding him closely, were alight with the red lust of murder.

“Come,” said Abnon-Tha, in a voice of imperious command. “It is time to go.” He turned to the still figure of Arctela and spoke an unknown word. With vacant eyes and noctambulistic paces, she followed at his heels as he stepped toward the open door. Phariom had helped Elaith to her feet, and was whispering words of reassurance in an effort to lull the growing horror and confused alarm that he saw in her eyes. She was able to walk, albeit slowly and uncertainly. Vemba-Tsith and Narghai drew back, motioning that she and Phariom should precede them; but Phariom, sensing their intent to slay him as soon as his back was turned, obeyed unwillingly and looked desperately about for something that he could seize as a weapon.

One of the metal braziers, full of smouldering coals, was at his very feet. He stooped quickly, lifted it in his hands, and turned upon the necromancers. Vemba-Tsith, as he had suspected, was prowling toward him with upraised sword, and was making ready to strike. Phariom hurled the brazier and its glowing contents full in the necromancer’s face, and Vemba-Tsith went down with a terrible, smothered cry. Narghai, snarling ferociously, leapt forward to assail the defenceless youth. His scimitar gleamed with a wicked luster in the lurid glare of the urns as he swung it back for the blow. But the weapon did not fall; and Phariom, steeling himself against the impending death, became aware that Narghai was staring beyond him as if petrified by the vision of some Gorgonian specter.

As if compelled by another will than his own, the youth turned and saw the thing that had halted Narghai's blow. Arctela and Abnon-Tha, pausing before the open door, were outlined against a colossal shadow that was not wrought by anything in the room. It filled the portals from side to side, it towered above the lintel — and then, swiftly, it became more than a shadow: it was a bulk of darkness, black and opaque, that somehow blinded the eyes with a strange dazzlement. It seemed to suck the flame from the red urns and fill the chamber with a chill of utter death and voidness. Its form was that of a worm-shapen column, huge as a dragon, its further coils still issuing from the gloom of the corridor; but it changed from moment to moment, swirling and spinning as if alive with the vortical energies of dark eons. Briefly it took the semblance of some demoniac giant with eyeless head and limbless body; and then, leaping and spreading like smoky fire, it swept forward into the chamber.

Abnon-Tha fell back before it, with frantic mumblings of malediction or exorcism; but Arctela, pale and slight and motionless, remained full in its path, while the thing enfolded her and enveloped her with a hungry flaring until she was hidden wholly from view.

Phariom, supporting Elaith, who leaned weakly on his shoulder as if about to swoon, was powerless to move. He forgot the murderous Narghai, and it seemed that he and Elaith were but faint shadows in the presence of embodied death and dissolution. He saw the blackness grow and wax with the towering of fed flame as it closed about Arctela; and he saw it gleam with eddying hues of somber iris, like the spectrum of a sable sun. For an instant, he heard a soft and flame-like murmuring. Then, quickly and terribly, the thing ebbed from the room. Arctela was gone, as if she had dissolved like a phantom on the air. Borne on a sudden gust of strangely

mingled heat and cold, there came an acrid odor, such as would rise from a burnt-out funeral pyre.

“Mordiggian!” shrilled Narghai, in hysteric terror. “It was the god Mordiggian! He has taken Arctela!”

It seemed that his cry was answered by a score of sardonic echoes, unhuman as the howling of hyenas, and yet articulate, that repeated the name Mordiggian. Into the room, from the dark hall, there poured a horde of creatures whose violet robes alone identified them in Phariom’s eyes as the priests of the ghoul-god. They had removed the skull-like masks, revealing heads and faces that were half anthropomorphic, half canine, and wholly diabolic. Also, they had taken off the fingerless gloves... There were at least a dozen of them. Their curving talons gleamed in the bloody light like the hooks of darkly tarnished metal; their spiky teeth, longer than coffin nails, protruded from snarling lips. They closed like a ring of jackals on Abnon-Tha and Narghai, driving them back into the farthest corner. Several others, entering tardily, fell with a bestial ferocity on Vemba-Tsith, who had begun to revive, and was moaning and writhing on the floor amid the scattered coals of the brazier.

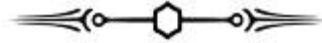
They seemed to ignore Phariom and Elaith, who stood looking on as if in some baleful trance. But the hindmost, ere he joined the assailants of Vemba-Tsith, turned to the youthful pair and addressed them in a hoarse, hollow voice, like a tomb-reverberate barking:

“Go, for Mordiggian is a just god, who claims only the dead, and has no concern with the living. And we, the priests of Mordiggian, deal in our own fashion with those who would violate his law by removing the dead from the temple.”

Phariom, with Elaith still leaning on his shoulder, went out into the dark hall, hearing a hideous clamor in which the screams of men were mingled

with a growling as of jackals, a laughter as of hyenas. The clamor ceased as, they entered the blue-lit sanctuary and passed toward the outer corridor, and the silence that filled Mordiggian's fane behind them was deep as the silence of the dead on the black altar-table.

The Black Abbot of Puthuum



Let the grape yield for us its purple flame,
And rosy love put off its maidenhood:
By blackening moons, in lands without a name,
We slew the Incubus and all his brood.

— Song of King Hoaraph's Bowmen

ZOBAL THE ARCHER and Cushara the pikebearer had poured many a libation to their friendship in the sanguine liquors of Yoros and the blood of the kingdom's enemies. In that long and lusty amity, broken only by such passing quarrels as concerned the division of a wine-skin or the apportioning of a wench, they had served amid the soldiery of King Hoaraph for a strenuous decade. Savage warfare and wild, fantastic hazard had been their lot. The renown of their valor had drawn upon them, ultimately, the honor of Hoaraph's attention, and he had assigned them for duty among the picked warriors that guarded his palace in Faraad. And sometimes the twain were sent together on such missions as required no common hardihood and no disputable fealty to the king.

Now, in company with the eunuch Simban, chief purveyor to Hoaraph's well-replenished harem, Zobal and Cushara had gone on a tedious journey through the tract known as Izdrel, which clove the western part of Yoros asunder with its rusty-colored wedge of desolation. The king had sent them to learn if haply there abode any verity in certain travelers' tales, which concerned a young maiden of celestial beauty who had been seen among the pastoral peoples beyond Izdrel. Simban bore at his girdle a bag of gold

coins with which, if the girl's pulchritude should be in any wise commensurate with the renown thereof, he was empowered to bargain for her purchase. The king had deemed that Zobal and Cushara should form an escort equal to all contingencies: for Izdrel was a land reputedly free of robbers, or, indeed, of any human inhabitants. Men said, however, that malign goblins, tall as giants and humped like camels, had oftentimes beset the wayfarers through Izdrel, that fair but ill-meaning lamiae had lured them to an eldritch death. Simban, quaking corpulently in his saddle, rode with small willingness on that outward journey; but the archer and the pike bearer, full of wholesome skepticism, divided their bawdy jests between the timid eunuch and the elusive demons.

Without other mishap than the rupturing of a wine-skin from the force of the new vintage it contained, they came to the verdurous pasture-lands beyond that dreary desert. Here, in low valleys that held the middle meanderings of the river Vos, cattle and dromedaries were kept by a tribe of herders who sent biannual tribute to Hoaraph from their teeming droves. Simban and his companions found the girl, who dwelt with her grandmother in a village beside the Vos; and even the eunuch acknowledged that their journey was well rewarded.

Cushara and Zobal, on their part, were instantly smitten by the charms of the maiden, whose name was Rubalsa. She was slender and of queenly height, and her skin was pale as the petals of white poppies; and the undulant blackness of her heavy hair was full of sullen copper gleamings beneath the sun. While Simban haggled shrilly with the cronelike grandmother, the warriors eyed Rubalsa with circumspect ardor and addressed to her such gallantries as they deemed discreet within hearing of the eunuch.

At last the bargain was driven and the price paid, to the sore depletion of Simban's moneybag. Simban was now eager to return to Faraad with his prize, and he seemed to have forgotten his fear of the haunted desert. Zobal and Cushara were routed from their dreams by the impatient eunuch before dawn; and the three departed with the still drowsy Rubalsa ere the village could awaken about them.

Noon, with its sun of candent copper in a blackish-blue zenith, found them far amid the rusty sands and iron-toothed ridges of Izdrel. The route they followed was little more than a footpath: for, though Izdrel was but thirty miles in width at that point, few travelers would dare those fiend-infested leagues; and most preferred an immensely circuitous road, used by the herders, that ran to the southward of that evil desolation, following the Vos nearly to its debouchment in the Indaskian Sea.

Cushara, splendid in his plate-armor of bronze, on a huge piebald mare with a cataphract of leather scaled with copper, led the cavalcade. Rubalsa, who wore the red homespun of the herders' women, followed on a black gelding with silk and silver harness, which Hoaraph had sent for her use. Close behind her came the watchful eunuch, gorgeous in particolored sendal, and mounted ponderously, with swollen saddlebags all about him, on the gray ass of uncertain age which, through his fear of horses and camels, he insisted on riding at all times. In his hand he held the leading-rope of another ass which was nearly crushed to the ground by the wine-skins, water-jugs and other provisions. Zobal guarded the rear, with unslung bow, slim and wiry in his suiting of light chain mail, on a nervous stallion that chafed incessantly at the rein. At his back he bore a quiver filled with arrows which the court sorcerer, Amdok, had prepared with singular spells and dippings in doubtful fluids, for his possible use against demons. Zobal had accepted the arrows courteously but had satisfied himself later that their

iron barbs were in no wise impaired by Amdok's treatment. A similarly ensorceled pike had been offered by Amdok to Cushara, who had refused it bluffly, saying that his own well-tried weapon was equal to the spitting of any number of devils.

Because of Simban and the two asses, the party could make little speed. However, they hoped to cross the wilder and more desolate portion of Izdrel ere night. Simban, though he still eyed the dismal waste dubiously, was plainly more concerned with his precious charge than with the imagined imps and lamiae. And Cushara and Zobal, both rapt in amorous reveries that centered about the luscious Rubalsa, gave only a perfunctory attention to their surroundings.

The girl had ridden all morning in demure silence. Now, suddenly, she cried out in a voice whose sweetness was made shrill by alarm. The others reined their mounts, and Simban babbled questions. To these Rubalsa replied by pointing toward the southern horizon, where, as her companions now saw, a peculiar pitch-black darkness had covered a great portion of the sky and hills, obliterating them wholly. This darkness, which seemed due neither to cloud nor sandstorm, extended itself in a crescent on either hand, and came swiftly toward the travelers. In the course of a minute or less, it had blotted the pathway before and behind them like a black mist; and the two arcs of shadow, racing northward, had flowed together, immuring the party in a circle. The darkness then became stationary, its walls no more than a hundred feet away on every side. Sheer, impenetrable, it surrounded the wayfarers, leaving above them a clear space from which the sun still glared down, remote and small and discolored, as if seen from the bottom of a deep pit.

"Ai! ai! ai!" howled Simban, cowering amid his saddlebags. "I knew well that some devilry would overtake us."

At the same moment the two asses began to bray loudly, and the horses, with a frantic neighing and squealing, trembled beneath their riders. Only with much cruel spurring could Zobal force his stallion forward beside Cushara's mare.

"Mayhap it is only some pestilential mist," said Cushara.

"Never have I seen such mist," replied Zobal doubtfully. "And there are no vapors to be met with in Izdrel. Methinks it is like the smoke of the seven hells that men fable beneath Zothique."

"Shall we ride forward?" said Cushara. "I would learn whether or not a pike can penetrate that darkness."

Calling out some words of reassurance to Rubalsa, the twain sought to spur their mounts toward the murky wall. But, after a few swerving paces, the mare and the stallion balked wildly, sweating and snorting, and would go no farther. Cushara and Zobal dismounted and continued their advance on foot.

Not knowing the source or nature of the phenomenon with which they had to deal, the two approached it warily. Zobal notched an arrow to his string, and Cushara held the great bronze-headed pike before him as if charging an embattled foe. Both were more and more puzzled by the murkiness, which did not recede before them in the fashion of fog, but maintained its opacity when they were close upon it.

Cushara was about to thrust his weapon into the wall. Then, without the least prelude, there arose in the darkness, seemingly just before him, a horrible, multitudinous clamor as of drums, trumpets, cymbals, jangling armor, jarring voices, and mailed feet that tramped to and fro on the stony ground with a mighty clangor. As Cushara and Zobal drew back in amazement, the clamor swelled and spread, till it filled with a babel of

warlike noises the whole circle of mysterious night that hemmed in the travelers.

“Verily, we are sore beset,” shouted Cushara to his comrade as they went back to their horses. “It would seem that some king of the north has sent his myrmidons into Yoros.”

“Yea,” said Zobal... “But it is strange that we saw them not ere the darkness came. And the darkness, surely, is no natural thing.”

Before Cushara could make any rejoinder, the martial clashings and shoutings ceased abruptly. All about it seemed that there was a rattling of innumerable sistra, a hissing of countless huge serpents, a raucous hooting of ill-omened birds that had foregathered by thousands. To these indescribably hideous sounds, the horses now added a continual screaming, and the asses a more frenzied braying, above which the outcries of Rubalsa and Simban were scarce audible.

Cushara and Zobal sought vainly to pacify their mounts and comfort the madly frightened girl. It was plain that no army of mortal men had beleaguered them: for the noises still changed from instant to instant, and they heard a most evil howling, and a roaring as of hellborn beasts that deafened them with its volume.

Naught, however, was visible in the gloom, whose circle now began to move swiftly, without widening or contracting. To maintain their position in its center, the warriors and their charges were compelled to leave the path and to flee northwardly amid the harsh ridges and hollows. All around them the baleful noises continued, keeping, as it seemed, the same interval of distance.

The sun, slanting westward, no longer shone into that eerily moving pit, and a deep twilight enveloped the wanderers. Zobal and Cushara rode as closely beside Rubalsa as the rough ground permitted, straining their eyes

constantly for any visible sign of the cohorts that seemed to encompass them. Both were filled with the darkest misgivings, for it had become all too manifest that supernatural powers were driving them astray in the untracked desert.

Moment by moment the gross darkness seemed to close in; and there was a palpable eddying and seething as of monstrous forms behind its curtain. The horses stumbled over boulders and outcroppings of ore-sharp stone, and the grievously burdened asses were compelled to put forth an unheard-of speed to keep pace with the ever-shifting circle that menaced them with its horrid clamor. Rubalsa had ceased her outcries, as if overcome by exhaustion or resignation to the horror of her plight; and the shrill screeches of the eunuch had subsided into fearful wheezing and gasping.

Ever and anon, it seemed that great fiery eyes glared out of the gloom, floating close to earth or moving aloft at a gigantic height. Zobal began to shoot his enchanted arrows at these appearance, and the speeding of each bolt was hailed by an appalling outburst of Satanic laughters and ululations.

In such wise they went on, losing all measure of time and sense of orientation. The animals were galled and footsore. Simban was nigh dead from fright and fatigue; Rubalsa drooped in her saddle; and the warriors, awed and baffled by the predicament in which their weapons appeared useless, began to flag with a dull weariness.

“Never again shall I doubt the legendry of Izdrel,” said Cushara gloomily.

“It is in my mind that we have not long either to doubt or believe,” rejoined Zobal.

To add to their distress, the terrain grew rougher and steeper, and they climbed acclivitous hillsides and went down endlessly into drear valleys. Anon they came to a flat, open, pebbly space. There, all at once, it seemed

that the pandemonium of evil noises drew back on every hand, receding and fading into faint, dubious whispers that died at a vast remove. Simultaneously, the circling night thinned out, and a few stars shone in the welkin, and the sharp-spined hills of the desert loomed starkly against a vermillion afterglow. The travelers paused and peered wonderingly at one another in a gloom that was no more than that of natural twilight.

“What new devilry is this?” asked Cushara, hardly daring to believe that the hellish leaguers had vanished.

“I know not,” said the archer, who was staring into the dusk.” “But here, mayhap, is one of the devils.”

The others now saw that a muffled figure was approaching them, bearing a lit lantern made of some kind of translucent horn. At some distance behind the figure, lights appeared suddenly in a square dark mass which none of the party had discerned before. This mass was evidently a large building with many windows.

The figure, drawing near, was revealed by the dim yellowish lantern as a black man of immense girth and tallness, garbed in a voluminous robe of saffron such as was worn by certain monkish orders, and crowned with the two-horned purple hat of an abbot. He was indeed a singular and unlooked-for apparition: for if any monasteries existed amid the barren reaches of Izdrel, they were hidden and unknown to the world. Zobal, however, searching his memory, recalled a vague tradition he had once heard concerning a chapter of negro monks that had flourished in Yoros many centuries ago. The chapter had long been extinct, and the very site of its monastery was forgotten. Nowadays there were few blacks anywhere in the kingdom, other than those who did duty as eunuchs guarding the seraglios of nobles and rich merchants

The animals began to display a certain uneasiness at the stranger's approach.

"Who art thou?" challenged Cushara, his fingers tightening on the haft of his weapon.

The black man grinned capaciously, showing rows of discolored teeth whose incisors were like those of a wild dog. His enormous unctuous jowls were creased by the grin into folds of amazing number and volume; and his eyes, deeply slanted and close together, seemed to wink perpetually in pouches that shook like ebon jellies. His nostrils flared prodigiously; his purple, rubbery lips drooled and quivered, and he licked them with a fat, red, salacious tongue before replying to Cushara's question.

"I am Ujuk, abbot of the monastery of Puthuum," he said, in a thick voice of such extraordinary volume that it appeared almost to issue from the earth under his feet. "Methinks the night has overtaken you far from the route of travelers. I bid you welcome to our hospitality."

"Aye, the night took us betimes," Cushara returned dryly. Neither he nor Zobal was reassured by the look of lust in the abbot's obscenely twinkling eyes as he peered at Rubalsa. Moreover, they had now noted the excessive and disagreeable length of the dark nails on his huge hands and bare, splayed feet: nails that were curving, three-inch talons, sharp as those of some beast or bird of prey.

It seemed, however, that Rubalsa and Simban were less abhorrently impressed, or had not noticed these details: for both made haste to acknowledge the abbot's proffer of hospitality and to urge acceptance upon the visibly reluctant warriors. To this urging, Zobal and Cushara yielded, both inwardly resolving to keep a close watch on all the actions and movements of the abbot of Puthuum.

Ujuk, holding the horn lantern aloft, conducted the travelers to that massive building whose lights they had discerned at no great distance. A ponderous gate of dark wood swung open silently at their approach, and they entered a spacious courtyard cobbled with worn, greasy-looking stones, and dimly illumined by torches in rusty iron sockets. Several monks appeared with startling suddenness before the travelers, who had thought the courtyard vacant at first glance. They were all of unusual bulk and stature, and their features possessed an extraordinary likeness to those of Ujuk, from whom, indeed, they could hardly have been distinguished save by the yellow cowls which they wore in lieu of the abbot's horned purple hat. The similarity extended even to their curved and talon-like nails of inordinate length. Their movements were fantasmally furtive and silent. Without speaking, they took charge of the horses and asses. Cushara and Zobal relinquished their mounts to the care of these doubtful hostlers with a reluctance which, apparently, was not shared by Rubalsa or the eunuch.

The monks also signified a willingness to relieve Cushara of his heavy pike and Zobal of his ironwood bow and half-emptied quiver of ensorcelled arrows. But at this the warriors balked, refusing to let the weapons pass from their possession.

Ujuk led them to an inner portal which gave admission to the refectory. It was a large, low room, lit by brazen lamps of antique workmanship, such as ghouls might have recovered from a desert-sunken tomb. The abbot, with ogre-like grinnings, besought his guests to take their place at a long massive table of ebony with chairs and benches of the same material.

When they had seated themselves, Ujuk sat down at the table's head. Immediately, four monks came in, bearing platters piled with spicily smoking viands, and deep earthen flagons full of a dark amber-brown liquor. And these monks, like those encountered in the courtyard, were

gross ebon-black simulacra of their abbot, resembling him precisely in every feature and member. Zobal and Cushara were chary of tasting the liquor, which, for its odor, appeared to be an exceptionally potent kind of ale: for their doubts concerning Ujuk and his monastery grew graver every moment. Also, in spite of their hunger, they refrained from the food set before them, which consisted mainly of baked meats that neither could identify. Simban and Rubalsa, however, addressed themselves promptly to the meal with appetites sharpened by long fasting and the weird fatigues of the day.

The warriors observed that neither food nor drink had been placed before Ujuk, and they conjectured that he had already dined. To their growing disgust and anger, he sat lolling obesely, with lustful eyes upon Rubalsa in a stare broken only by the nictitations that accompanied his perpetual grinning. This stare soon began to abash the girl, and then to alarm and frighten her. She ceased eating; and Simban, who had been deeply preoccupied till then with his supper, was plainly perturbed when he saw the flagging of her appetite. He seemed for the first time to notice the abbot's unmonastic leering, and showed his disapproval by sundry horrible grimaces. He also remarked pointedly, in a loud, piercing voice, that the girl was destined for the harem of King Hoaraph. But at this, Ujuk merely chuckled, as if Simban had uttered some exquisitely humorous jest.

Zobal and Cushara were hard put to repress their wrath, and both itched hotly for the fleshing of their weapons in the abbot's gross bulk. He, however, seemed to have taken Simban's hint, for he shifted his gaze from the girl. Instead, he began to eye the warriors with a curious and loathsome avidity, which they found little less insupportable than his ogling of Rubalsa. The well-nourished eunuch also came in for his share of Ujuk's

regard which seemed to have in it the hunger of a hyena gloating over his prospective prey.

Simban, obviously ill at ease, and somewhat frightened, now tried to carry on a conversation with the abbot, volunteering much information as to himself, his companions, and the adventures which had brought them to Puthuum. Ujuk seemed little surprised by this information; and Zobal and Cushara, who took no part in the conversation, became surer than ever that he was no true abbot.

“How far have we gone astray from the route to Faraad?” asked Simban.

“I do not consider that you have gone astray,” rumbled Ujuk in his subterranean voice, “for your coming to Puthuum is most timely. We have few guests here, and we are loth to part with those who honor our hospitality.”

“King Hoaraph will be impatient for our return with the girl,” Simban quavered. “We must depart early tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is another matter,” said Ujuk, in a tone half unctuous, half sinister. “Perhaps, by then, you will have forgotten this deplorable haste.”

Little was said during the rest of the meal; and, indeed, little was drunk or eaten; for even Simban seemed to have lost his normally voracious appetite. Ujuk, still grinning as if at some uproarious jest known only to himself, was apparently not concerned with the urging of food upon his guests.

Certain of the monks came and went unbidden, removing the laden dishes, and as they departed, Zobal and Cushara perceived a strange thing: for no shadows were cast by the monks on the lamplit floor beside the moving adumbrations of the vessels they carried! From Ujuk, however, a heavy, misshapen umbrage fell and lay like a prone incubus beside his chair.

“Methinks we have come to a hatching place of demons,” whispered Zobal to Cushara. “We have fought many men, thou and I, but never such as wanted wholesome shadows.”

“Aye,” muttered the pike-bearer. “But I like this abbot even less than his monks: though he alone is the caster of a shade.”

Ujuk now rose from his seat, saying: “I trow that ye are all weary and would sleep betimes.”

Rubalsa and Simban, who had both drunk a certain amount of the powerful ale of Puthuum, nodded a drowsy assent. Zobal and Cushara, noting their premature sleepiness, were glad they had declined the liquor.

The abbot led his guests along a corridor whose gloom was but little relieved by the flaring of torches in a strong draft that blew stealthily from an undetermined source, causing a rout of wild shadows to flitter beside the passers. On either hand there were cells with portals shut only by hangings of a coarse hempen fabric. The monks had all vanished, the cells were seemingly dark, and an air of age-old desolation pervaded the monastery, together with a smell as of moldering bones piled in some secret catacomb.

Midway in the hall, Ujuk paused and held aside the arras of a doorway that differed in no wise from the rest. Within, a lamp burned, depending from an archaic chain of curiously linked and fretted metal. The room was bare but spacious, and a bed of ebony with opulent quiltings of an olden fashion stood by the farther wall under an open window. This chamber, the abbot indicated, was for the occupancy of Rubalsa; and he then offered to show the men and the eunuch their respective quarters.

Simban, seeming to wake all at once from his drowsiness, protested at the idea of being separated in such wise from his charge. As if Ujuk had been prepared for this, and had given orders accordingly, a monk appeared forthwith, bringing quilts which he laid on the flagged floor within the

portals of Rubalsa's room. Simban stretched himself promptly on the improvised bed, and the warriors withdrew with Ujuk.

"Come," said the abbot, his wolfish teeth gleaming in the torchlight. "Ye will sleep soundly in the beds I have prepared."

Zobal and Cushara, however, had now assumed the position of guardsmen outside the doorway of Rubalsa's chamber. They told Ujuk curtly that they were responsible to King Hoaraph for the girl's safety and must watch over her at all times.

"I wish ye a pleasant vigil," said Ujuk, with a cachinnation like the laughter of hyenas in some underground tomb.

With his departure, it seemed that the black slumber of a dead antiquity settled upon all the building. Rubalsa and Simban, apparently, slept without stirring, for there was no sound from behind the hempen arras. The warriors spoke only in whispers, lest they should arouse the girl. Their weapons held ready for instant use, they watched the shadowy hall with a jealous vigilance: for they did not trust the quietude about them, being well assured that a host of foul cacodemons couched somewhere behind it, biding the time of assault.

Howbeit, nothing occurred to reconfirm them in such apprehensions. The draft that breathed furtively along the hall seemed to tell only of age-forgotten death and cyclic solitude. The two began to perceive signs of dilapidation in walls and floor that had heretofore escaped their notice. Eery, fantastical thoughts came to them with insidious persuasion: it seemed that the building was a ruin that had lain uninhabited for a thousand years; that the black abbot Ujuk and his shadowless monks were mere imaginations, things that had never been; that the moving circle of darkness, the pandemonian voices, that had herded them toward Puthuum, were no

more than a daymare whose memory was now fading in the fashion of dreams.

Thirst and hunger troubled them, for they had not eaten since early morn, and had snatched only a few hasty drafts of wine or water during the day. Both, however, began to feel the oncreeping of a sleepy hebetude which, under the circumstances, was most undesirable. They nodded, started and awoke recurrently to their peril. But still, like a siren voice in poppy-dreams, the silence seemed to tell them that all danger was a bygone thing, an illusion that belonged to yesterday.

Several hours passed, and the hall lightened with the rising of a late moon that shone through a window at its eastern end. Zobal, less bedrowsed than Cushara, was awakened to full awareness by a sudden commotion among the animals in the courtyard without. There were neighings that rose to a frenzied pitch, as if something had frightened the horses; and to these the asses began to add their heavy braying, till Cushara was also aroused.

“Make sure that thou drowsest not again,” Zobal admonished the pike-bearer. “I shall go forth and inquire as to the cause of this tumult.”

“Tis a good thought,” commended Cushara. “And while thou art gone, see to it that none has molested our provisions. And bring back with thee some apricots and cakes of sesame and a skin of ruby-red wine.”

The monastery itself remained silent as Zobal went down the hall, his buskins of link-covered leather ringing faintly. At the hall’s end an outer door stood open, and he passed through it into the courtyard. Even as he, emerged, the animals ceased their clamor. He could see but dimly, for all the torches in the courtyard, save one, had burnt out or been extinguished; and the low gibbous moon had not yet climbed the wall. Nothing, to all appearance, was amiss: the two asses were standing quietly beside the mountainous piles of provisions and saddlebags they had borne; the horses

seemed to drowse amicably in a group. Zobal decided that perhaps there had been some temporary bickering between his stallion and Cushara's mare.

He went forward to make sure that there was no other cause of disturbance. Afterward he turned to the wineskins, intending to refresh himself before rejoining Cushara with a supply of drinkables and comestibles. Hardly had he washed the dust of Izdrel from his throat with a long draft, when he heard an eery, dry whispering whose source and distance he could not at once determine. Sometimes it seemed at his very ear, and then it ebbed away as if sinking into profound subterranean vaults. But the sound, though variable in this manner, never ceased entirely; and it seemed to shape itself into words that the listener almost understood: words that were fraught with the hopeless sorrow of a dead man who had sinned long ago, and had repented his sin through black sepulchral ages.

As he harkened to the sere anguish of that sound, the hair bristled on the archer's neck, and he knew such fear as he had never known in the thick of battle. And yet, at the same time, he was aware of deeper pity than the pain of dying comrades had ever aroused in his heart. And it seemed that the voice implored him for commiseration and succor, laying upon him a weird compulsion that he dared not disobey. He could not wholly comprehend the things that the whisperer besought him to do: but somehow he must ease that desolate anguish.

Still the whispering rose and fell; and Zobal forgot that he had left Cushara to a lone vigil beset with hellish dangers; forgot that the voice itself might well be only a device of demons to lure him astray. He began to search the courtyard, his keen ears alert for the source of the sound; and, after some dubitation, he decided that it issued from the ground in a corner opposite the gateway. Here, amid the cobbling, in the wall's angle, he found

a large slab of syenite with a rusty metal ring in its center. He was quickly confirmed in his decision: for the whispering became louder and more articulate, and he thought that it said to him: "Lift the slab."

The archer grasped the rusty ring with both hands, and putting forth all his strength, he succeeded in tilting back the stone, albeit not without such exertion as made him feel that his very spine would crack. A dark opening was exposed, and from it surged a charnel stench so overpowering that Zobal turned his face away and was like to have vomited. But the whisper came with a sharp, woeful beseeching, out of the darkness below; and it said to him: "Descend."

Zobal wrenched from its socket the one torch that still burned in the courtyard. By its lurid flaring he saw a flight of worn steps that went down into the reeking sepulchral gloom; and resolutely he descended the steps, finding himself at their bottom in a hewn vault with deep shelves of stone on either hand. The shelves, running away into darkness, were piled with human bones and mummified bodies; and plainly the place was the catacomb of the monastery.

The whispering had ceased, and Zobal peered about in bewilderment not unmingled with horror.

"I am here," resumed the dry, susurrous voice, issuing from amid the heaps of mortal remnants on the shelf close beside him. Startled, and feeling again that crisping of the hairs on his neck, Zobal held his torch to the low shelf as he looked for the speaker. In a narrow niche between stacks of disarticulated bones, he beheld a half-decayed corpse about whose long, attenuate limbs and hollow body there hung a few rotten shreds of yellow cloth. These, he thought, were the remnants of a robe such as was worn by the monks of Puthuum. Then, thrusting his torch into the niche, he discerned the lean, mummy-like head, on which moldered a thing that had

once been the horned hat of an abbot. The corpse was black as ebony, and plainly it was that of a great negro. It bore an aspect of incredible age, as if it had lain there for centuries: but from it came the odor of newly ripe corruption that had sickened Zobal when he lifted the slab of syenite.

As he stood staring down, it seemed to Zobal that the cadaver stirred a little, as if fain to rise from its recumbent posture; and he saw a gleaming as of eyeballs in the deepshadowed sockets; and the dolorously curling lips were retracted still farther; and from between the bared teeth there issued that awful whispering which had drawn him into the catacomb.

“Listen closely,” said the whispering. “There is much for me to tell thee, and much for thee to do when the telling is done.

“I am Uldor, the abbot of Puthuum. More than a thousand years ago I came with my monks to Yoros from Ilcar, the black empire of the north. The emperor of Ilcar had driven us forth, for our cult of celibacy, our worship of the maiden goddess Ojhal, were hateful to him. Here amid the desert of Izdrel we built our monastery and dwelt unmolested.

“We were many in number at first; but the years went by, and one by one the Brothers were laid in the catacomb we had delved for our resting place. They died with none to replace them. I alone survived in the end: for I had won such sanctity as ensures longevous days, and had also become a master of the arts of sorcery. Time was a demon that I held at bay, like one who stands in a charmed circle. My powers were still hale and unimpaired; and I lived on as an anchorite in the monastery.

“At first the solitude was far from irksome to me, and I was wholly absorbed in my study of the arcana of nature. But after a time it seemed that such things no longer satisfied. I grew aware of my loneliness, and was much beset by the demons of the waste, who had troubled me little

heretofore. Succubi, fair but baneful, lamiae with the round soft bodies of women, came to tempt me in the drear vigils of the night.

“I resisted... But there was one she-devil, more cunning than the others, who crept into my cell in the semblance of a girl I had loved long ago, ere yet I had taken the vow of Ojhal. To her I succumbed; and of the unholy union was born the half-human fiend, Ujuk, who has since called himself the abbot of Puthuum.

“After that sin, I wished to die... And the wish was manifoldly strengthened when I beheld the progeny of the sin. Too greatly, however, had I offended Ojhal; and a frightful penance was decreed for me. I lived... and daily I was plagued and persecuted by the monster, Ujuk, who grew lustily in the manner of such offspring. But when Ujuk had gained his full stature, there came upon me such weakness and decrepitude as made me hopeful of death. Scarce could I stir in my impotence, and Ujuk, taking advantage of this, bore me in his horrid arms to the catacomb and laid me among the dead. Here I have remained ever since, dying and rotting eternally — and yet eternally alive. For almost a millennium I have suffered unsleepingly the dire anguish of repentance that brings no expiation.”

“Through the powers of saintly and sorcerous vision that never left me, I was doomed to watch the foul deeds, the hell-dark iniquities of Ujuk. Wearing the guise of an abbot, endowed with strange infernal powers together with a kind of immortality, he has presided over Puthuum through the centuries. His enchantments have kept the monastery hidden... save from those that he wishes to draw within reach of his ghoulish hunger, his incubus-like desires. Men he devours; and women are made to serve his lust... And still I am condemned to see his turpitudes; and the seeing is my most grievous punishment.”

The whisper sank away; and Zobal, who had listened in eldritch awe, as one who hears the speech of a dead man, was doubtful for a moment that Uldor still lived. Then the sere voice went on:

“Archer, I crave a boon from thee; and I offer in return a thing that will aid thee against Ujuk. In thy quiver thou bearest charmed arrows: and the wizardry of him that wrought them was good. Such arrows can slay the else-immortal powers of evil. They can slay Ujuk — and even such evil as endures in me and forbids me to die. Archer, grant me an arrow through the heart: and if that suffice not, an arrow through the right eye, and one through the left. And leave the arrows in their mark, for I deem that thou canst well spare so many. One alone is needed for Ujuk. As to the monks thou hast seen, I will tell thee a secret. They are twelve in number, but...”

Zobal would scarcely have believed the thing that Uldor now unfolded, if the events of the day had not left him beyond all incredulity. The abbot continued:

“When I am wholly dead, take thou the talisman which depends about my neck. The talisman is a touchstone that will dissolve such ill enchantments as have a material seeming, if applied thereto with the hand.”

For the first time, Zobal perceived the talisman, which was an oval of plain gray stone lying upon Uldor’s withered bosom on a chain of black silver.

“Make haste, O archer,” the whispering implored.

Zobal had socketed his torch in the pile of moldering bones beside Uldor. With a sense of mingled compulsion and reluctance, he drew an arrow from his quiver, notched it, and aimed unflinchingly down at Uldor’s heart. The shaft went straightly and deeply into its mark; and Zobal waited. But anon from the retracted lips of the black abbot there issued a faint murmuring: “Archer, another arrow!”

Again the bow was drawn, and a shaft sped unerringly into the hollow orbit of Uldor's right eye. And again, after an interval, there came the almost inaudible pleading: "Archer, still another shaft."

Once more the bow of ironwood sang in the silent vault, and an arrow stood in the left eye of Uldar, quivering with the force of its propulsion. This time there was no whisper from the rotting lips: but Zobal heard a curious rustling, and a sigh as of lapsing sand. Beneath his gaze the black limbs and body crumbled swiftly, the face and head fell in, and the three arrows sagged awry, since there was naught now but a pile of dust and parting bones to hold them embedded.

Leaving the arrows as Uldor had enjoined him to do, Zobal groped for the gray talisman that was now buried amid those fallen relics. Finding it, he hung it carefully at his belt beside the long straight sword which he carried. Perhaps, he reflected, the thing might have its use ere the night was over.

Quickly he turned away and climbed the steps to the courtyard. A saffron-yellow and lopsided moon was soaring above the wall, and he knew by this that he had been absent overlong from his vigil with Cushara. All, however, seemed tranquil: the drowsing animals had not stirred; and the monastery was dark and soundless. Seizing a full wine-skin and a bag containing such edibles as Cushara had asked him to bring, Zobal hurried back to the open hall.

Even as he passed into the building, the arras-like silence before him was burst asunder by a frightful hubbub. He distinguished amid the clamor the screaming of Rubalsa, the screeching of Simban, and the furious roaring of Cushara: but above these, as if to drown them all, an obscene laughter mounted continually, like the welling forth of dark subterrene waters thick and foul with the fats of corruption.

Zobal dropped the wine-skin and the sack of comestibles and raced forward, unslinging his bow as he went. The outcries of his companions continued, but he heard them faintly now above the damnable incubus-like laughter that swelled as if to fill the whole monastery. As he neared the space before Rubalsa's chamber, he saw Cushara beating with the haft of his pike at a blank wall in which there was no longer a hempen-curtained doorway. Behind the wall the screeching of Simban ceased in a gurgling moan like that of some butchered steer; but the girl's terror-sharpened cries still mounted through the smothering cachinnation.

"This wall was wrought by demons," raged the pike bearer as he smote vainly at the smooth masonry. "I kept a faithful watch — but they built it behind me in a silence as of the dead. And a fouler work is being done in that chamber."

"Master thy frenzy," said Zobal, as he strove to regain the command of his own faculties amid the madness that threatened to overwhelm him. At that instant he recalled the oval gray touchstone of Uldor, which hung at his baldric from its black silver chain; and it came to him that the closed wall was perhaps an unreal enchantment against which the talisman might serve even as Uldor had said.

Quickly he took the touchstone in his fingers and held it to the blank surface where the doorway had been. Cushara looked on with an air of stupefaction, as if deeming the archer demented. But even as the talisman clicked faintly against it, the wall seemed to dissolve, leaving only a rude arras that fell away in tatters as if it too had been no more than a sorcerous illusion. The strange disintegration continued to spread, the whole partition melted away to a few worn blocks, and the gibbous moon shone in as the abbey of Puthuum crumbled silently to a gapped and roofless ruin!

All this had occurred in a few moments; but the warriors found no room for wonder. By the livid light of the moon, which peered down like the face of a worm-gnawed cadaver, they looked upon a scene so hideous that it caused them to forget all else. Before them, on a cracked floor from whose interstices grew desert grasses, the eunuch Simban lay sprawled in death. His raiment was torn to streamers, and blood bubbled darkly from his mangled throat. Even the leather pouches which he bore at his girdle had been ripped open, and gold coins, vials of medicine and other oddments were scattered around him.

Beyond, by the half-crumbled outer wall, Rubalsa lay in a litter of rotted cloth and woodwork which had been the gorgeously quilted ebon bed. She was trying to fend off with her lifted hands the enormously swollen shape that hung horizontally above her, as if levitated by the floating wing-like folds of its saffron robe. This shape the warriors recognized as the abbot Ujuk.

The overwelling laughter of the black incubus had ceased, and he turned upon the intruders a face contorted by diabolic lust and fury. His teeth clashed audibly, his eyes glowed in their pouches like beads of red-hot metal, as he withdrew from his position over the girl and loomed monstrously erect before her amid the ruins of the chamber.

Cushara rushed forward with leveled pike ere Zobal could fit one of his arrows to the string. But even as the pike-bearer crossed the sill, it seemed that the foully bloated form of Ujuk multiplied itself in a dozen yellow-garmented shapes that surged to meet Cushara's onset. Appearing as if by some hellish legerdemain, the monks of Puthuum had mustered to assist their abbot.

Zobal cried out in warning, but the shapes were all about Cushara, dodging the thrusts of his weapon and clawing ferociously at his plate-

armor with their terrific three-inch talons. Valiantly he fought them, only to go down after a little and disappear from sight as if whelmed by a pack of ravening hyenas.

Remembering the scarce credible thing that Uldor had told him, Zobal wasted no arrows upon the monks. His bow ready, he waited for full sight of Ujuk beyond the seething rout that mangled malignantly back and forth above the fallen pike-bearer. In an eddying of the pack he aimed swiftly at the looming incubus, who seemed wholly intent on that fiendish struggle, as if directing it in some wise without spoken word or ponderable gesture. Straight and true the arrow sped with an exultant singing; and good was the sorcery of Amdok, who had wrought it: for Ujuk reeled and went down, his horrid fingers tearing vainly at the shaft that was driven nigh to its fledging of eagle-quills in his body.

Now a strange thing occurred: for, as the incubus fell and writhed to and fro in his dying, the twelve monks all dropped away from Cushara, tossing convulsively on the floor as if they were but shaken shadows of the thing that died. It seemed to Zobal that their forms grew dim and diaphanous, and he saw the cracks in the flagstones beyond them; and their writhings lessened with those of Ujuk; and when Ujuk lay still at last, the faint outlines of the figures vanished as if erased from earth and air. Naught remained but the noisome bulk of that fiend who had been the progeny of the abbot Uldor and the lamia. And the bulk shrank visibly from instant to instant beneath its sagging garments, and a smell of ripe corruption arose, as if all that was human in the hellish thing were rotting swiftly away.

Cushara had scrambled to his feet and was peering about in a stunned fashion. His heavy armor had saved him from the talons of his assailants; but the armor itself was scored from greaves to helmet with innumerable scratches.

“Whither have the monks gone?” he inquired. “They were all about me an instant ago, like so many wild dogs worrying a fallen aurochs.”

“The monks were but emanations of Ujuk,” said Zobal. “They were mere fantasies, multiple eidola, that he sent forth and withdrew into himself at will; and they had no real existence apart from him. With Ujuk’s death they had become less than shadows.”

“Verily, such things are prodigious,” opined the pikebearer.

The warriors now turned their attention to Rubalsa, who had struggled to a sitting posture amid the downfallen wreckage of her bed. The tatters of rotten quilting which she clutched about her with shamefast fingers at their approach, served but little to conceal her well-rounded ivory nakedness. She wore an air of mingled fright and confusion, like a sleeper who has just awakened from some atrocious nightmare.

“Had the incubus harmed thee?” inquired Zobal anxiously. He was reassured by her faint, bewildered negative. Dropping his eyes before the piteous disarray of her girlish beauty, he felt in his heart a deeper enamourment than before, a passion touched with such tenderness as he had never known in the hot, brief loves of his hazard-haunted days. Eyeing Cushara covertly, he knew with dismay that this emotion was shared to the fullest by his comrade.

The warriors now withdrew to a little distance and turned their backs decorously while Rubalsa dressed.

“I deem,” said Zobal in a low voice beyond overhearing of the girl, “that thou and I tonight have met and conquered such perils as were not contracted for in our service to Hoaraph. And I deem that we are of one mind concerning the maiden, and love her too dearly now to deliver her to the captious lust of a sated king. Therefore we cannot return to Faraad. If it please thee, we shall draw lots for the girl; and the loser will attend the

winner as a true comrade till such time as we have made our way from Izdrel, and have crossed the border of some land lying beyond Hoaraph's rule."

To this Cushara agreed. When Rubalsa had finished her dressing, the two began to look about them for such objects as might serve in the proposed sortilege. Cushara would have tossed one of the gold coins, stamped with Hoaraph's image, which had rolled from Simban's torn moneybag. But Zobal shook his head at the suggestion, having espied certain items which he thought even more exquisitely appropriate than the coin. These objects were the talons of the incubus, whose corpse had now dwindled in size and was horribly decayed, with a hideous wrinkling of the whole head and an actual shortening of the members. In this process, the claws of hands and feet had all dropped away and were lying loose on the pavement. Removing his helmet, Zobal stooped down and placed with it the five hellish-looking talons of the right hand, among which that of the index finger was the longest.

He shook the helmet vigorously, as one shakes a dicebox, and there was a sharp clattering from the claws. Then, he held the helmet out to Cushara, saying: "He who draws the forefinger talon shall take the girl."

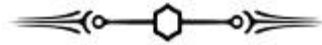
Cushara put in his hand and withdrew it quickly, holding aloft the heavy thumbnail, which was shortest of all. Zobal drew the nail of the middle finger; and Cushara, at his second trial, brought forth the little finger's claw. Then, to the deep chagrin of the pike-bearer, Zobal produced the dearly coveted index talon.

Rubalsa, who had been watching this singular procedure with open curiosity, now said to the warriors:

"What are ye doing?"

Zobal started to explain, but before he had finished, the girl cried out indignantly: "Neither of ye has consulted my preference in this matter." Then, pouting prettily, she turned away from the disconcerted archer and flung her arms about the neck of Cushara.

The Weaver in the Vault



THE INSTRUCTIONS OF Famorgh, fifty-ninth king of Tasuun, were minutely circumstantial and explicit, and, moreover, were not to be disobeyed without the incurring of penalties that would make mere death a pleasant thing. Yanur, Grotara, and Thirlain Ludoch, three of the king's hardest henchmen, riding forth at morn from the palace in Miraab, debated with a thin semblance of jocosity whether, in their case, obedience or disobedience would prove the direr evil.

The commission they had just received from Famorgh was no less singular than distasteful. They were to visit Chaon Gacca, the long-forsaken seat of the kings of Tasuun, lying more than ninety miles to the north of Miraab amid the desert hills; and, descending into the burial vaults beneath the ruined palace, were to find and bring back to Miraab whatever remained of the mummy of King Tnepreez, founder of the dynasty to which Famorgh belonged. No one had entered Chaon Gacca for centuries, and the preservation of its dead in the catacombs was uncertain; but even if only the skull of Tnepreez was left, or the bone of his little finger, or the dust of mummia into which he had crumbled, the men-at-arms were to fetch it carefully, guarding it like a holy relic.

“’Tis an errand for hyenas rather than warriors,” grumbled Yanur in his black and spade-shaped beard. “By the god Yululun, Keeper of the Tombs, I deem it an ill thing to disturb the peaceful dead. And truly it is not well for men to enter Chaon Gacca, where Death has made his capital, and has gathered all the ghouls to do him homage.”

“The king should have sent his embalmers,” opined Grotara. He was the youngest and hugest of the three, being taller by a full head than Yanur or Thirlain Ludoch; and like them, he was a veteran of savage wars and desperate perils.

“Yea, I said it was an errand for hyenas,” rejoined Yanur. “But the king knew well that there were no mortal beings in all Miraab, saving ourselves, who would dare to enter the accursed vaults of Chaon Gacca. Two centuries ago, King Mandis, wishing to retrieve the golden mirror of Queen Avaina for his favorite leman, commanded two of his bravos to descend within the vaults, where the mummy of Avaina sits enthroned in her separate tomb, holding the mirror in her withered hand...And the bravos went to Chaon Gacca...but they did not return; and King Mandis, being warned by a soothsayer, made no second attempt to procure the mirror, but contented his leman with another gift.”

“Yanur, thy tales would gladden those who await the scything of the executioner,” said Thirlain Ludoch, the oldest of the trio, whose brown beard was faded to a hempen hue by desert suns. “But I chide thee not. It is common knowledge that the catacombs are ridden with worse hauntings than those of liches or phantoms. Strange devils came there long ago from the mad, unholy desert of Dloth; and I have heard it told that the kings forsook Chaon Gacca because of certain Shadows, that appeared at full noon in the palace-halls, with no visible form to cast them, and would not depart thereafter, being changeless amid all the changings of the light, and wholly undimmed by the exorcisms of priests and sorcerers. Men say that the flesh of any who dared to touch the Shadows, or to tread upon them, became black and putrid like the flesh of month-old corpses, all in a mere instant. Because of such testing, when one of the Shadows came and sat upon his throne, the right hand of King Agmeni rotted to the wrist, and fell

away like the sloughing of a leper... And after that, no man would dwell in Chaon Gacca.”

“Verily, I have heard other stories,” said Yanur. “The town’s abandonment was due mainly to the failure of the wells and cisterns, from which the water vanished following an earthquake that left the land riven with hell-deep chasms. The palace of the kings was sundered to its nethermost vault by one of the chasms; and King Agmeni was seized by a violent madness when he inhaled the infernal vapors issuing from the rent; nor was he ever wholly sane in his latter lifetime, after the quitting of Chaon Gacca and the rearing of Miraab.”

“Now that is a tale that I can believe,” said Grotara. “And surely I must deem that Famorgh has inherited the madness of his forefather, Agmeni. Methinks that the royal house of Tasuun rots and totters to its fall. Harlots and sorcerers swarm in the palace of Famorgh like charnel worms; and now, in this princess Lunalia of Xylac whom he has taken to wife, he has found a harlot and a witch in one. He has sent us on this errand at the prompting of Lunalia, who desires the mummy of Tnepreez for her own unhallowed purpose. Tnepreez, I have heard, was a great wizard in his time; and Lunalia would avail herself of the potent virtue of his bones and dust in the brewing of her philtres. Pah! I like not the task of such purveyance. There are mummies enow in Miraab for the making of potions to madden the Queen’s lovers. Famorgh is utterly besotted and befooled.”

“Beware,” admonished Thirlain Ludoch, “for Lunalia is a vampire who lusts ever for the young and strong...and thy turn may come next, O Grotara, if fortune brings us back alive from this enterprise. I have seen her watching thee.”

“I would sooner mate with the wild lamia,” protested Grotara in virtuous indignation.

“Thy aversion would help thee not,” said Thirlain Ludoch... “for I know others who have drunk the potions... But we are now nearing the last wineshop in Miraab; and my throat is dusty beforehand with the very thought of this journey. I shall need a whole stoup of wine from Yoros to wash the dust away.”

“Thou sayest sooth,” agreed Yanur. “Already, I have become dry as the mummy of Tnepreez. And thou, Grotara?”

“I will quaff any drink, if it be not the philtre-brew of Queen Lunalia.”

Mounted on swift, untiring dromedaries, and followed by a fourth camel bearing on its back a light wooden sarcophagus for the accommodation of King Tnepreez, the three henchmen had soon left behind them the bright and noisy streets of Miraab, and the fields of sesame, the crofts of apricot and pomegranate, lying for miles about the city. Before noon, they had parted from the route of caravans, and had taken a road that was seldom used by any but lions and jackals. However, the way to Chaon Gacca was plain, for the ruts of olden chariots were still deeply marked in the desert soil, where rain no longer fell at any season.

On the first night, they slept beneath the cold and crowding stars, and kept watch by turn lest a lion should come upon them unaware, or a viper should crawl among them for warmth. During the second day, they passed amid steepening hills and deep ravines that retarded their progress. Here there was no rustling of serpent or lizard, and naught but their own voices and the shuffling of the camels to break the silence that lay upon all things like a mute malediction. Sometimes, on the desiccating tors above them, against the darkly litten sky, they saw the boughs of century-withered cacti, or the boles of trees that immemorial fires had blasted.

The second sunset found them in sight of Chaon Gacca, rearing its dilapidated walls at a distance of less than four leagues in a broad open

valley. Coming then to a wayside shrine of Yuckla, the small and grotesque god of laughter, whose influence was believed to be mainly benignant, they were glad to go no farther on that day, but took shelter in the crumbling shrine for fear of the ghouls and devils, who might dwell in such vicinage to those accursed ruins. They had brought with them from Miraab a wineskin filled with the fervent ruby wine of Yoros; and though the skin was now three-fourths empty, they poured a libation in the twilight on the broken altar, and prayed to Yuckla for such protection as he might give them against the demons of the night.

They slept on the worn and chilly flags about the altar, watching by turn, as before. Grotara, who kept the third watch, beheld at last the paling of the close-hung stars, and aroused his companions in a dawn that was like a sifting of ashes through the cinder-black darkness.

After a scanty meal of figs and dried goat-flesh, they resumed their journey, guiding their camels down the valley, and weaving back and forth on the bouldered slopes when they came to abysmal rents in the earth and rock. Their approach to the ruins was rendered slow and tortuous by such divagations. The way was lined by the stocks of orchard trees that had perished long ago, and by cotes and granges where even the hyena no longer made his lair.

Because of their many detours, it was hard upon noon when they rode through the hollow-ringing streets of the city. Like ragged purple cloaks, the shadows of the ruining houses were drawn close to their walls and portals. Everywhere the havoc of earthquake was manifest, and the fissured avenues and mounded mansions served to verify the tales that Yanur had heard concerning the reason of the city's abandonment.

The palace of the kings, however, was still pre-eminent above the other buildings. A tumbled pile, it frowned in dark porphyry on a low acropolis

amid the northern quarter. For the making of this acropolis, a hill of red syenite had been stripped of its covering soil in elder days, and had been hewn to sheer and rounding walls, circled by a road that wound slowly about it to the summit. Following this road, and nearing the portals of the courtyard, the henchmen of Famorgh came to a fissure that clove their path from wall to precipice, yawning far in the cliff. The chasm was less than a yard in width; but the dromedaries balked before it. The three dismounted; and, leaving the camels to await their return, they leapt lightly across the fissure. Grotara and Thirlain Ludoch carrying the sarcophagus, and Yanur bearing the wineskin, they passed beneath the shattered barbican.

The great courtyard was heavily strewn with the wreckage of once-lofty towers and balconies, over which the warriors climbed with much wariness, eyeing the shadows closely, and loosening their swords in the sheath, as if they were surmounting the barricades of a hidden foe. All three were startled by the pale and naked form of a colossean female, which they saw reclining on the blocks and rubble in a portico beyond the court. But, drawing nearer, they found that the shape was not that of a she-demon, as they had apprehended, but was merely a marble statue that had once stood like a caryatid among the mighty pillars.

Following the directions given them by Famorgh, they entered the main hall. Here, beneath the chasmed and collapsing roof, they moved with the utmost caution, fearing that a light jar, a whisper, would bring the suspended ruin upon their heads like an avalanche. Overturned tripods of greenish copper, tables and trivets of splintered ebony, and the shards of gayly painted porcelains, were mingled with the huge fragments of pedestals and fusts and entablatures; and upon a shivered dais of green, blood-spotted heliotrope, the tarnished silver throne of the kings careened

amid the mutilated sphinxes, carved from jasper, that kept eternal guard beside it.

At the further end of the hall, they found an alcove, still unblocked by fallen debris, in which were the stairs that led downward to the catacombs. They paused briefly ere beginning their descent. Yanur applied himself without ceremony to the skin which he carried, and lightened it considerably before giving it into the hands of Thirlain Ludoch, who had marked his potations, with solicitude. Thirlain Ludoch and Grotara drank the remainder of the vintage between them; and the latter did not grumble at the thick lees which fell to his lot. Thus replenished, they lit three torches of pitchy terebinth, which they had brought along in the sarcophagus. Yanur led the way, daring the tenebrous depths with drawn sword, and a torch flaming smokily in his left hand. His companions followed, bearing the sarcophagus, in which, by raising the hinged lid slightly, they had socketed the other torches. The potent wine of Yoros mounted with them, driving away their shadowy fears and apprehensions; but all three were seasoned drinkers, and they moved with great care and circumspection, and did not stumble on the dim, uncertain steps.

Passing through a series of wine-cellars, full of cracked and sharded jars, they came at last, after many zigzag plungings of the stairs, to a vast corridor hewn in the nether syenite, below the level of the city streets. It stretched before them through illimitable gloom, its walls unshattered, and its roof admitting no crevice-filtered ray. It seemed that they had entered some impregnable citadel of the dead, On the right hand were the tombs of the elder kings; on the left, were the sepulchers of the queens; and lateral passages led to a world of subsidiary vaults, reserved for other members of the royal family. At the further end of the main hall, they would find the burial-chamber of Tnepreez.

Yanur, following the right-hand wall, soon came to the first tomb. According to custom, its portals were open, and were lower than a man's stature, so that all who entered must bow in humbleness to death. Yanur held his torch to the lintel, and read stumblingly the legend graven in the stone, which told that the vault was that of King Acharnil, father of Agmeni.

"Verily," he said, "we shall find nothing here, other than the harmless dead." Then, the wine he had drunk impelling him to a sort of bravado, he stooped before the portals and thrust his flickering flambeau into the tomb of Acharnil.

Surprised, he swore a loud and soldierly oath, that made the others drop their burden and crowd behind him. Peering into the square, concamerated chamber, which had a kingly spaciousness, they saw that it was unoccupied by any visible tenant. The tall chair of mystically graven gold and ebony, in which the mummy should have sat crowned and robed as in life, was addorsed against the farther wall on a low dais. In it, there lay an empty robe of sable and carmine, and a miter-shaped crown of silver set with black sapphires, as if the dead king had doffed them and had gone away!

Startled, with the wine dying swiftly in their brains, the warriors felt the crawling chill of an unknown mystery. Yanur, however, steeled himself to enter the vault. He examined the shadowy corners, he lifted and shook the raiment of Achamil, but found no clue to the riddle of the mummy's disappearance. The tomb was clean of dust, and there was no visible sign nor faintest odor of mortal decay.

Yanur rejoined his comrades, and the three eyed each other in eerie consternation. They resumed their exploring of the hall; and Yanur, as he came to the doorway of each tomb, paused before it and thrust his flambeau into the wavering murk, only to discover a vacant throne, and the cast-off regalia of royalty.

There was, it seemed, no reasonable explanation for the vanishing of the mummies, in whose preservation the powerful spices of the Orient had been employed, together with natron, rendering them virtually incorruptible. From the circumstances, it did not appear that they had been removed by human robbers, who would hardly have left behind the precious jewels, fabrics and metals; and it was even more unlikely that they had been devoured by animals: for in that case the bones would have remained, and the vestments would have been torn and disordered. The mythic terrors of Chaon Gacca began to assume a darker imminence; and the seekers peered and listened fearfully as they went on in the hushed sepulchral hall.

Presently, after they had verified the vacancy of more than a dozen tombs, they saw the glimmering of several steely objects before them on the floor of the corridor. These, on investigation, proved to be two swords, two helmets and cuirasses of a slightly antiquated type, such as had formerly been worn by the warriors of Tasuun. They might well have belonged to the unreturning braves sent by King Mandis to retrieve the mirror of Avaina.

Yanur, Grotara and Thirlain Ludoch, viewing these sinister relics, were seized by an almost frantic desire to accomplish their errand and regain the sunlight. They hurried on, no longer pausing to inspect the separate tombs, and debating, as they went, the curious problem that would be presented if the mummy sought by Famorgh and Lunalia should have vanished like the others. The king had commanded them to fetch the remains of Tnepreez; and they knew that no excuse or explanation of their failure to do this would be accepted. Under such circumstances, their return to Miraab would be inadvisable; and the only safety would lie in flight beyond the northern desert, along the route of caravans to Zul-Bha-Sair or Xylac.

It seemed that they traversed an enormous distance, among the more ancient vaults. Here the formation of the stone was softer and more friable,

and the earthquake had wrought considerable damage. The floor was littered with detritus, the sides and roof were full of fractures, and some of the chambers had partially fallen in, so that their vacancy was revealed to the casual peering of Yanur and his companions.

Nearing the hall's end, they were confronted by a chasm, dividing both floor and roof, and splitting the sill and lintel of the last chamber. The gulf was about four feet wide, and the torch of Yanur could not disclose its bottom. He found the name of Tnepreez on the lintel, whose antique inscription, telling the deeds and titles of the king, had been sundered in twain by the cataclysm. Then, walking on a narrow ledge, he entered the vault. Grotara and Thirlain Ludoch crowded behind him, leaving the sarcophagus in the hall.

The sepulchral throne of Tnepreez, overturned and broken, was lying across the fissure that had rifted the whole tomb from side to side. There was no trace of the mummy, which, from the chair's inverted position, had doubtless fallen into those yawning depths in the hour of its overthrow.

Before the seekers could voice their disappointment and their dismay, the silence about them was broken by a dull rumbling as of distant thunder. The stone trembled beneath their feet, the walls shook and wavered, and the rumbling noise, in long, shuddering undulations, grew louder and more ominous. The solid floor appeared to rise and flow with a continuous sickening motion; and then, as they turned to flee, it seemed that the universe came down upon them in a roaring deluge of night and ruin.

Grotara, wakening in darkness, was aware of an agonizing burden, as if some monumental shaft were builded on his crushed feet and lower legs. His head throbbed and ached as if from the stroke of a stunning mace. He found that his arms and body were free; but the pain in his extremities

became insufferable, causing him to swoon anew, when he tried to drag them from beneath their encumbrance.

Terror closed upon him like the clutch of ghoulish fingers, as he realized his situation. An earthquake, such as had caused the abandonment of Chaon Gacca, had occurred; and he and his fellows were entombed in the catacombs. He called aloud, repeating the names of Yanur and Thirlain Ludoch many times; but there was no groan nor rustle to assure him that they still lived.

Reaching out with his right hand, he encountered numerous pieces of rubble. Slewng himself toward them, he found several bouldersized fragments of stone, and among them a smooth and roundish thing, with a sharp ridge in the center, which he knew for the crested helmet worn by one of his companions. Even with the most painful striving, he could reach no further, and was unable to identify the owner. The metal was heavily dented, and the comb was bent as if by the impact of some ponderous mass.

In spite of his predicament, the fierce nature of Grotara refused to yield itself to despair. He drew himself to a sitting position, and, doubling forward, he contrived to reach the enormous block that had fallen across his nether limbs. He pushed against it with herculean effort, raging like a trapped lion, but the mass was immovable. For hours, it seemed, he strove as if with some monstrous cacodemon. His frenzy was calmed only by exhaustion. He lay back at length; and the darkness weighed upon him like a live thing, and seemed to gnaw him with fangs of pain and horror.

Delirium hovered near, and he thought that he heard a dim and hideous humming, far below in the stony bowels of the earth. The noise grew louder, as if ascending from a riven hell. He became aware of a wan, unreal light that wavered above him, disclosing in doubtful glimpses the shattered

roof. The light strengthened; and lifting himself a little, he saw that it poured from the earthquake chasm in the floor.

It was a light such as he had never seen: a livid luster, that was not the reflection of lamp or torch or firebrand. Somehow, as if the senses of hearing and sight were confused, he identified it with the hideous humming.

Like a sourceless dawn, the luminosity crept upon the ruin wrought by the temblor. Grotara saw that the whole entrance of the tomb, and much of its concameration, had caved in. A fragment, striking him on the head, had knocked him senseless; and a huge section of the roof had fallen across his extremities.

The bodies of Thirlain Ludoch and Yanur were lying close to the broadened chasm. Both, he felt sure, were dead. The grizzled beard of Thirlain Ludoch was dark and stiff with blood that had run down from the crushed cranium; and Yanur was half-buried in a pile of blocks and detritus, from which his torso and left arm were emergent. His torch had burned itself out in his stiffly clutching fingers, as if in a blackened socket.

All this Grotara noted in a vague dream-like manner. Then he perceived the real source of the strange illumination. A coldly shining, hueless globe, round as a puffball and large as a human head, had risen from the fissure and was hovering above it like a mimic moon. The thing oscillated with a slight but ceaseless vibratory motion. From it, as if caused by this vibration, the heavy humming poured, and the light fell in ever-trembling waves.

A dim awe was upon Grotara; but he felt no terror. It seemed that the light and sound were woven upon his senses like some Lethean spell. Rigid he sat, forgetful of his pain and despair, while the globe hovered for a few instants above the chasm, and then floated slowly and horizontally, till it hung directly over the upturned features of Yanur.

With the same deliberate slowness, the same ceaseless oscillation, it descended upon the face and neck of the dead man, which appeared to melt away like tallow as the globe settled lower and lower. The humming deepened, the globe flamed with an eerie luster, and its death-like pallor was mottled with impure iris. It swelled and bloated obscenely, while the whole head of the warrior shrank within the helmet, and the plates of his cuirass fell in as if the very torso were shrivelling beneath them.

Grotara's eyes beheld the horrific vision clearly; but his brain was numbed as if by a merciful hemlock. It was hard to remember, hard to think... but somehow he recalled the empty tombs, the ownerless crowns and vestments. The enigma of the missing mummies, over which he and his companions had puzzled vainly, was now resolved. But the thing that battened upon Yanur was beyond all mortal knowledge or surmise. It was some ghoulish denizen of a nether world, set free by the demons of earthquake.

Now, in the catalepsy that thrallled him, he saw the gradual settling of the piled débris in which the legs and hips of Yanur were inhumed. The helmet and body-mail were like empty shards, the outflung arm had withered, had shortened, and the very bones were dwindling away, appearing to melt and liquefy. The globe had grown enormous. It was flushed with unclean ruby, like a vampire moon. From it, there issued palpable ropes and filaments, pearly, shuddering into strange colors, that appeared to fasten themselves to the ruined floor and walls and roof, like the weaving of a spider. Thickly and more thickly they multiplied, forming a curtain between Grotara and the chasm, and falling upon Thirlain Ludoch and himself, till he saw the sanguine burning of the globe as through arabesques of baleful opal.

Now the web had filled the entire tomb. It ran and glistened with a hundred changing hues, it dripped with glories drawn from the spectrum of

dissolution. It bloomed with ghostly blossoms, and foliages that grew and faded as if by necromancy. The eyes of Grotara were blinded; more and more he was meshed in the weird web. Unearthly, chill as the fingers of death, its gossamers clung and quivered upon his face and hands.

He could not tell the duration of the weaving, the term of his enthrallment. Dimly, at last, he beheld the thinning of the luminous threads, the retraction of the trembling arabesques. The globe, a thing of evil beauty, alive and aware in some holocryptic fashion, had risen now from the empty armor of Yanur. Diminishing to its former size, and putting off its colors of blood and opal, it hung for a little above the chasm. Grotara felt that it was watching him... was watching Thirlain Ludoch. Then, like a satellite of the nether caverns, it fell slowly into the fissure, and the light faded from the tomb and left Grotara in deepening darkness.

After that, there were ages of fever, thirst and madness, of torment and slumber, and recurrent strugglings against the massive block that held him prisoner. He babbled insanely, he howled like a wolf; or, lying supine and silent, he heard the multitudinous, muttering voices of ghouls that conspired against him. Gangrening swiftly, his crushed extremities seemed to throb like those of a Titan. He drew his sword with the strength of delirium, and endeavored to saw himself free at the shins, only to swoon from loss of blood.

Awakening feebly, and scarce able to lift his head, he saw that the light had returned, and heard once more the incessant vibrant humming that filled the vault. His mind was clear, and a weak terror stirred within him: for he knew that the Weaver had risen again from the chasm...and knew the reason of its coming.

He turned his head laboriously, and watched the glowing ball as it hung and oscillated, and then came down in leisurely descent on the face of

Thirlain Ludoch. Again he saw it bloat obscenely, like a blood flushed moon, fed with the wasting of the old warrior's body. Again, with dazzled eyes, he beheld the weaving of the web of impure iris, patterned with deathly splendor, veiling the ruinous catacomb with its weird illusions, Again, like a dying beetle, he was meshed in its chill, unearthly strands; and its necromantic flowers, blooming and perishing, latticed the void air above him. But, ere the retracting of the web, his delirium came upon him and brought a demon-peopled darkness; and the Weaver finished its toil unseen, and returned unheeded to the chasm.

He tossed in the hells of fever, or lay at the black, undivined nadir of oblivion. But death tarried, still aloof; and he lived on by sheer virtue of his youth and giant strength. Once more, toward the end, his senses cleared, and he saw for the third time the unholy light and heard again the odious humming. The Weaver was poised above him, pale, shining and vibrant...and he knew that it was waiting for him to die.

Lifting his sword with weak fingers, he sought to drive it away. But the thing hovered, alert and vigilant, beyond his reach; and he thought that it watched him like a vulture. The sword dropped from his hand. The luminous horror did not depart. It drew nearer, like an eyeless, pertinacious face; and it seemed to follow him, swooping through the ultimate night as he fell deathward.

With none to behold the glory of its weaving, with darkness before and after, the Weaver spun its final web in the tomb of Tnepreez.

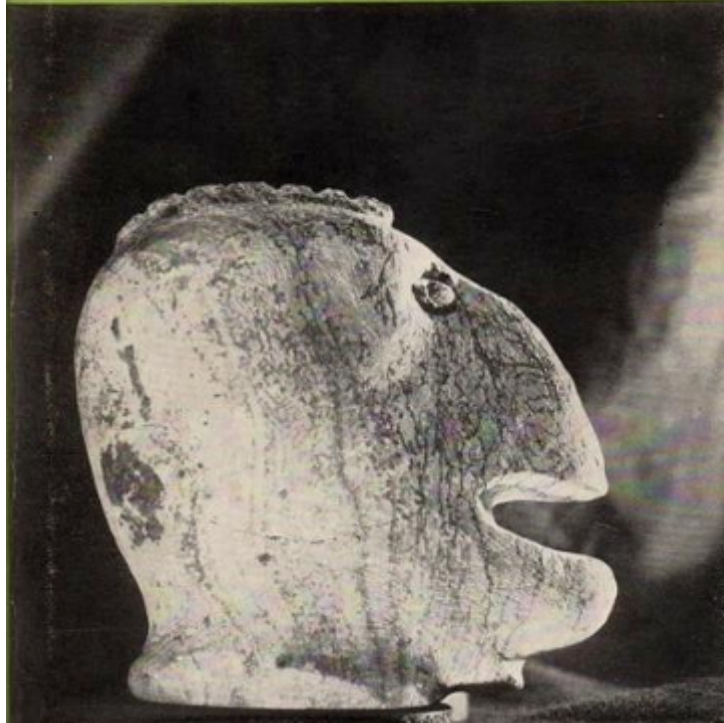
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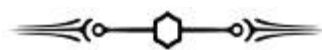
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THE
ABOMINATIONS
OF YONDO
Clark Ashton Smith



The first edition

The Nameless Offspring



TOO DREADFUL FOR belief was the legend of Tremoth Hall, of the hidden dweller in the burial-vaults and the thing in the barred room.

Many and multiform are the dim horrors of Earth, infesting her ways from the prime. They sleep beneath the unturned stone; they rise with the tree from its root; they move beneath the sea and in subterranean places; they dwell in the inmost adyta; they emerge betimes from the shutten sepulchre of haughty bronze and the low grave that is sealed with clay. There be some that are long known to man, and others as yet unknown that abide the terrible latter days of their revealing. Those which are the most dreadful and the loathliest of all are haply still to be declared. But among those that have revealed themselves aforetime and have made manifest their veritable presence, there is one which may not openly be named for its exceeding foulness. It is that spawn which the hidden dweller in the vaults has begotten upon mortality. — From the Necronomicon of Abdul Alhazred.

In a sense, it is fortunate that the story I must now relate should be so largely a thing of undetermined shadows, of half-shaped hints and forbidden inferences. Otherwise, it could never be written by human hand or read by human eye. My own slight part in the hideous drama was limited to its last act, and to me its earlier scenes were merely a remote and ghastly legend. Yet even so, the broken reflex of its unnatural horrors has crowded out in perspective the main events of normal life; has made them seem no more than frail gossamers woven on the dark, windy verge of some unsealed abyss, some deep, half-open charnel wherein Earth's nethermost corruptions lurk and fester.

The legend of which I speak was familiar to me from childhood as a theme of family whispers and head shakings, for Sir John Tremoth had been

a school-mate of my father. But I had never met Sir John, had never visited Tremoth Hall, till the time of those happenings which formed the final tragedy. My father had taken me from England to Canada when I was a small infant; he had prospered in Manitoba as an apiarist, and for years after his death the bee ranch had kept me too busy to execute a long-cherished dream of visiting my natal land and exploring its rural by-ways.

When finally I set sail, the story was pretty dim in my memory, and Tremoth Hall was no conscious part of my itinerary when I began a motorcycle tour of the English counties. In any case, I should never have been drawn to the neighbourhood out of morbid curiosity such as the frightful tale might possibly have evoked in others. My visit, as it happened, was purely accidental. I had forgotten the exact location of the place and did not even dream that I was in its vicinity. If I had known it seems to me that I should have turned aside, in spite of the circumstances that impelled me to seek shelter, rather than intrude upon the almost demoniacal misery of its owner.

When I came to Tremoth Hall I had ridden all day through a rolling countryside with leisurely, winding lanes. The day had been fair, with skies of pale azure above noble parks that were tinged with the first amber and crimson of autumn. But toward the middle of the afternoon a mist had come in from the hidden ocean across low hills, and had closed me about with its moving, phantom circle. Somehow, in that deceptive fog, I managed to lose my way, to miss the mile-post that would have given me direction to the town where I had planned to spend the ensuing night.

I went on for a while at random, thinking that I should soon reach another crossroad. The way that I followed was little more than a rough lane and was singularly deserted. The fog had darkened and drawn closer, obliterating all horizons, but from what I could see of it the country was all

heath and boulders, with no sign of cultivation. I topped a level ridge and went down a long, monotonous slope as the mist continued to thicken with twilight. I thought that I was riding toward the west, but before me in the wan dusk was no faintest gleam or flare of colour to betoken the drowned sunset. A dank odour that was touched with salt, like the smell of sea marshes, came to meet me.

The road turned at a sharp angle, and I seemed to be riding between downs and marshland. The night gathered with an almost unnatural quickness, as if in haste to overtake me, and I began to feel a dim concern that I had gone astray in regions that were more dubious than an English county. The fog and twilight seemed to withhold a silent landscape of chill, disquieting mystery.

Then, to the left of my road and a little before me, I saw a light that somehow suggested a mournful and tear-dimmed eye. It shone among blurred, uncertain masses that were like trees from a ghostland wood. A nearer mass, as I approached it, was resolved into a small lodge building such as would guard the entrance of some estate. It was dark and apparently unoccupied. Pausing and peering, I saw the outlines of a wrought-iron gate in a hedge of untrimmed yew. It all had a desolate and forbidding air, and I felt in my very marrow the brooding chillness that had come in from the unseen marsh in that dismal, ever-coiling fog. But the light was promise of human nearness on the lonely downs, and I might obtain shelter for the night or at least find someone who could direct me to a town or inn.

Somewhat to my surprise, the gate was unlocked. It swung inward with a rusty, grating sound, as if it had not been opened for a long time, and pushing my motor-cycle before me, I followed a weed-grown drive toward the light. The rambling mass of a large manor house disclosed itself among trees and shrubs whose artificial forms, like the hedge of ragged yew, were

assuming a wilder grotesquery than they had received from the hand of the topiary.

The fog had turned into a bleak drizzle. Almost groping in the gloom, I found a dark door at some distance from the window that gave forth the solitary light. In response to my thrice-repeated knock, I heard at length the muffled sound of slow, dragging footfalls. The door was opened with a gradualness that seemed to indicate caution or reluctance, and I saw before me an old man bearing a lighted taper in his hand. His fingers trembled with palsy or decrepitude, and monstrous shadows flickered behind him in a dim hallway and touched his wrinkled features as with the flitting of ominous, batlike wings.

“What do you wish, sir?” he asked. The voice, though quavering and hesitant, was far from churlish and did not suggest the attitude of suspicion and downright inhospitality which I had begun to apprehend. However, I sensed a sort of irresolution or dubiety; and as the old man listened to my account of the circumstances that had led me to knock at that lonely door, I saw that he was scrutinising me with a keenness that belied my first impression of extreme senility. “I knew you were a stranger in these parts,” he commented, when I had finished. “But might I inquire your name, sir?”

“I am Henry Chaldane.”

“Are you not the son of Mr. Arthur Chaldane?”

Somewhat mystified, I admitted the ascribed paternity.

“You resemble your father, sir. Mr. Chaldane and Sir John Tremoth were great friends, in the days before your father went to Canada. Will you come in, sir? This is Tremoth Hall. Sir John has not been in the habit of receiving guests for a long time, but I shall tell him you are here and it may be that he will wish to see you.”

Startled, and not altogether agreeably surprised at the discovery of my whereabouts, I followed the old man to a book-lined study whose furnishings bore evidence of luxury and neglect. Here he lit an oil lamp of antique fashion, with a dusty, painted shade, and left me alone with the dustier volumes and furniture. I felt a queer embarrassment, a sense of actual intrusion, as I waited in the wan, yellow lamplight, and there came back to me the details of the strange, half-forgotten story I had overheard from my father in childhood years.

Lady Agatha Tremoth, Sir John's wife, in the first year of their marriage, had become the victim of cataleptic seizures. The third seizure had apparently terminated in death, for she did not revive after the usual interval and displayed all the familiar marks of the *rigor mortis*. Lady Agatha's body was placed in the family vaults, which were of almost fabulous age and extent, and had been excavated in the hill behind the manor house. On the day following the interment, Sir John, troubled by a queer but insistent doubt as to the finality of the medical verdict, had re-entered the vaults in time to hear a wild cry and had found Lady Agatha sitting up in her coffin. The nailed lid was lying on the stone floor, and it seemed impossible that it could have been removed by the struggles of the frail woman. However, there was no other plausible explanation, though Lady Agatha herself could throw little light on the circumstances of her strange resurrection.

Half-dazed and in a state of dire terror that was easily understandable, she told an incoherent tale of her experience. She did not seem to remember struggling to free herself from the coffin, but was troubled mainly by recollections of a pale, hideous, unhuman face which she had seen in the gloom on awakening from her prolonged and deathlike sleep. It was the sight of this face, looking down at her as she lay in the *open* coffin, that had caused her to cry out so wildly. The thing had vanished before Sir John's

approach, fleeing swiftly to the inner vaults, and she had formed only a vague idea of its bodily appearance. She thought, however, that it was large and white and ran like an animal on all fours, though its limbs were semi-human.

Of course, her tale was regarded as a dream or a figment of delirium induced by the awful shock of her experience, which had blotted out all recollection of its true terror. But the memory of the horrible face and figure seemed to obsess her permanently, and was plainly fraught with associations of mind-unhinging fear. She did not recover from her illness, but lived on in a shattered condition of brain and body; and nine months later she died, after giving birth to her first child.

Her death was a merciful thing; for the child, it seemed, was one of those appalling monsters that sometimes appear in human families. The exact nature of its abnormality was not known, though frightful and divergent rumours had purported to emanate from the doctor, nurses and servants who had seen it; some of the latter had left Tremoth Hall and refused to return, following a single glimpse of the monstrosity. After Lady Agatha's death, Sir John had withdrawn from society, and little was divulged in regard to his doings or the fate of the horrible infant. But people said that the child was kept in a locked room with iron-barred windows, which no one except Sir John himself ever entered. The tragedy had blighted his whole life and he had become a recluse, living alone with one or two faithful servants, and allowing his estate to decline grievously through neglect.

I was still reviewing the dreadful legend, still striving to recollect certain particulars that had almost passed from memory, when I heard the sound of footsteps which from their slowness and feebleness I took to be those of the returning manservant. However, I was mistaken; for the person who entered was plainly Sir John Tremoth himself. The tall, slightly bent figure, the face

that was lined as if by the trickling of some corrosive acid, were marked with a dignity that seemed to triumph over the double ravages of mortal sorrow and illness.

Somehow — though I could have calculated his real age — I had expected an old man, but he was scarcely beyond middle life. Yet his cadaverous pallor and feeble, tottering walk were those of a man who is stricken with some fatal malady. His manner, as he addressed me, was impeccably courteous and even gracious, but the voice was that of one to whom the ordinary relations and actions of life had long since become meaningless and perfunctory.

“Harper tells me that you are the son of my old school friend, Arthur Chaldane,” he said. “I bid you welcome to such poor hospitality as I am able to offer. I have not received guests for many years, and I fear you will find the Hall pretty dull and dismal and think me an indifferent host. Nevertheless, you must remain, at least for the night. Harper has gone to prepare dinner for us.”

“You are very kind,” I replied. “But I fear that I am intruding.”

“Not at all,” he countered firmly. “You must be my guest. It is miles to the nearest inn and the fog is changing into a heavy rain. Indeed, I am glad to have you. You must tell me all about your father and yourself at dinner. In the meanwhile, I’ll try to find a room for you if you’ll come with me.”

He led me to the second floor of the house and down a long hall with beams and panels of ancient oak. We passed several doors which were doubtless those of bedchambers. All were closed, and one of the doors was reinforced with iron bars, heavy and sinister as those of a dungeon cell. Inevitably I surmised that this was the chamber in which the monstrous child had been confined, and also I wondered if the abnormality still lived after a lapse of time that must have been nearly thirty years. How abysmal,

how abhorrent, must have been its departure from the human type to necessitate an immediate removal from the sight of others! And what characteristics of its further development could have rendered necessary the massive bars on an oaken door which by itself was strong enough to have resisted the assaults of any common man or beast?

Without even glancing at the door, my host went on, carrying a taper that scarcely shook in his feeble fingers. But my curious reflections as I followed him were interrupted with nerve-shattering suddenness by a loud cry that seemed to issue from the barred room. The sound was a long, ever-mounting ululation, infra-bass at first, like the tomb-muffled voice of a demon, and rising through abominable degrees to a shrill, ravenous fury, as if the demon had emerged by a series of underground steps to the open air. It was neither human nor bestial; it was wholly preternatural, hellish, macabre; and I shuddered with an insupportable eeriness that still persisted when the demon voice, after reaching its culmination, had returned by reverse degrees to a profound, sepulchral silence.

Sir John had given no apparent heed to the awful sound, but had gone on with no more than his usual faltering. He had reached the end of the hall, and was pausing before the second chamber from the one with the sealed door.

“I’ll let you have this room,” he said. “It’s just beyond the one which I occupy.” He did not turn his face toward me as he spoke, and his voice was unnaturally toneless and restrained. I realised with another shudder that the chamber he had indicated as his own was adjacent to the room from which the frightful ululation had appeared to issue.

The chamber to which he admitted me had manifestly not been used for years. The air was chill, stagnant, unwholesome with an all-pervading mustiness, and the antique furniture had gathered the inevitable increment

of dust and cobwebs. Sir John began to apologise. “I didn’t realise the condition of the room,” he said. “I’ll send Harper, after dinner, to do a little dusting and clearing and put fresh linen on the bed.”

I protested, rather vaguely, that there was no need for him to concern himself over me. The unhuman loneliness and decay of the old house, its lustrums and decades of neglect, and the corresponding desolation of its owner, had impressed me more painfully than ever. And I dared not speculate overmuch concerning the ghastly secret of the barred chamber and the hellish howling that still echoed in my shaken nerves. Already I regretted the singular fortuity that had drawn me to that place of evil and festering shadows. I felt an urgent desire to leave, to continue my journey even in the face of the bleak autumnal rain and wind-blown darkness. But I could think of no excuse that would be sufficiently tangible and valid. Manifestly, there was nothing to do but remain.

Our dinner was served in a dismal but stately room by the old man whom Sir John had referred to as Harper. The meal was plain but substantial and well-cooked, and the service was impeccable. I had begun to infer that Harper was the only servant — a combination of valet, butler, housekeeper and chef.

In spite of my hunger and the pains taken by my host to make me feel at ease, the meal was a solemn and almost funereal ceremony. I could not forget my father’s story; still less could I forget the sealed door and the baleful ululation. Whatever it was, the monstrosity still lived; and I felt a complex mingling of admiration, pity and horror as I looked at the gaunt face of Sir John Tremoth and reflected upon the lifelong hell to which he had been condemned, and the apparent fortitude with which he had borne its unthinkable ordeals.

A bottle of excellent sherry was brought in. Over this we sat for an hour or more. Sir John spoke at some length concerning my father, of whose death he had not previously heard; and he drew me out in regard to my own affairs with the subtle adroitness of a polished man of the world. He said little about himself, and not even by hint or implication did he refer to the tragic history which I have outlined.

Since I am rather abstemious and did not empty my glass with much frequency, the major part of the heavy wine was consumed by my host. Toward the end it seemed to bring out in him a curious vein of confidentiality, and he spoke for the first time of the ill health that was all too patent in his appearance. I learned that he was subject to that most painful form of heart disease, *angina pectoris*, and had recently recovered from an attack of unusual severity.

“The next one will finish me,” he said. “And it may come at any time — perhaps to-night.” He made the announcement very simply, as if he were voicing a commonplace or venturing a prediction about the weather. Then, after a slight pause, he went on with more emphasis and weightiness of tone: “Maybe you’ll think me queer, but I have a fixed prejudice against burial or vault interment. I want my remains to be thoroughly cremated, and have left careful directions to that end. Harper will see to it that they are fulfilled. Fire is the cleanest and purest of the elements, and it cuts short all the damnable processes between death and ultimate disintegration. I can’t bear the idea of some mouldy, worm-infested tomb.”

He continued to discourse on this subject for some time, with a singular elaboration and tenseness of manner that showed it to be a familiar theme of thought if not an actual obsession. It seemed to possess a morbid fascination for him; and there was a painful light in his hollow, haunted eyes, and a touch of rigidly subdued hysteria in his voice, as he spoke. I remembered

the interment of Lady Agatha and her tragic resurrection, and the dim horror of the vaults that had formed an inexplicable and disturbing part of her story. It was not hard to understand Sir John's aversion to burial; but I was far from suspecting the full terror and ghastliness on which his repugnance had been founded.

Harper had disappeared after bringing the sherry, and I surmised that he had been given orders for the renovation of my room. We had now drained our last glasses, and my host had ended his peroration. The wine, which had animated him briefly, seemed to die out and he looked more ill and haggard than ever. Pleading my own fatigue, I expressed a wish to retire, and he, with his invariable courtliness, insisted on seeing me to my chamber and making sure of my comfort before seeking his own bed.

In the hall above we met Harper, who was just descending from a flight of stairs that must have led to an attic or third floor. He was carrying a heavy iron pan in which a few scraps of meat remained, and I caught an odour of pronounced gaminess, almost of virtual putrescence, as he went by. I wondered if he had been feeding the unknown monstrosity, and if perhaps its food were supplied to it through a trap in the ceiling of the barred room. The surmise was reasonable enough, but the odour of the scraps, by a train of remote, half-literary association, had begun to suggest other surmises which seemed beyond the realm of possibility and reason. Certain evasive, incoherent hints appeared to join themselves suddenly into an atrocious and abhorrent whole. With imperfect success, I assured myself that the thing I had fancied was incredible to science, a mere creation of superstitious diablerie. No, it could not be — here in England, of all places — that corpse-devouring demon of Arabesque tales and legends known as the *ghoul*!

Contrary to my fears, there was no repetition of the fiendish howling as we passed the secret room. But I thought that I heard a measured crunching, such as a large animal would make in devouring its food...

My room, though still drear and dismal enough, had been cleared of its accumulated dust and matted gossamers. After a personal inspection, Sir John left me and retired to his own chamber. I was struck by his deathly pallor and weakness as he said good-night to me, and felt guiltily apprehensive that the strain of receiving and entertaining a guest might have aggravated the dire disease from which he suffered. I seemed to detect actual pain and torment beneath his careful armour of urbanity, and wondered if the urbanity had not been maintained at an excessive cost.

The fatigue of my day-long journey, together with the heavy wine I had drunk, should have conduced to early slumber. But though I lay with tightly closed lids in the darkness I could not dismiss these evil shadows, those black and charnal larvæ, that swarmed upon me from the ancient house. Insufferable and forbidden things besieged me with filthy talons, brushed me with noisome coils, as I tossed through eternal hours and lay staring at the grey square of the storm-darkened window. The dripping of the rain, the sough and moan of the wind, resolved themselves to a dread mutter of half-articulate voices that plotted against my peace and whispered loathfully of nameless secrets in demonian language.

At length, after the seeming lapse of nocturnal centuries, the tempest died away and I no longer heard the equivocal voices. The window lightened a little in the black wall, and the terrors of my night-long insomnia seemed to withdraw partially, but without bringing the surcease of slumber. I became aware of utter silence, and then, in the silence, of a queer, faint, disquieting sound whose cause and location baffled me for many minutes.

The sound was muffled and far off at times; then it seemed to draw near, as if it were in the next room. I began to identify it as a sort of scratching such as would be made by the claws of an animal on solid woodwork. Sitting up in bed and listening attentively, I realised with a fresh start of horror that it came from the direction of the barred chamber. It took on a strange resonance; then it became almost inaudible, and suddenly, for awhile, it ceased. In the interim I heard a single groan, like that of a man in great agony or terror. I could not mistake the source of the groan, which had issued from Sir John Tremoth's room; nor was I doubtful any longer as to the causation of the scratching.

The groan was not repeated, but the damnable clawing sound began again and was continued till daybreak. Then, as if the creature that had caused the noise were wholly nocturnal in its habits, the faint, vibrant rasping ceased and was not resumed. In a state of dull, nightmarish apprehension, drugged with weariness and want of sleep, I had listened to it with intolerably straining ears. With its cessation, in the livid dawn, I slid into a deep slumber from which the muffled and amorphous spectres of the old Hall were unable to detain me any longer.

I was awakened by a loud knocking on my door — a knocking in which even my sleep-confused senses could recognise the imperative and urgent. It must have been close upon midday, and feeling guilty at having overslept so egregiously, I ran to the door and opened it. The old manservant, Harper, was standing without, and his tremulous, grief-broken manner told me before he spoke that something of dire import had occurred.

"I regret to tell you, Mr. Chaldane," he quavered, "that Sir John is dead. He did not answer my knock as usual, so I made bold to enter his room. He must have died early this morning."

Inexpressibly shocked by this announcement, I recalled the single groan I had heard in the grey beginning of dawn. My host, perhaps, had been dying at that very moment. I recalled, too, the detestable, nightmare scratching. Unavoidably, I wondered if the groan had been occasioned by fear as well as by physical pain. Had the strain and suspense of listening to that hideous sound brought on the final paroxysm of Sir John's malady? I could not be sure of the truth, but my brain seethed with awful and ghastly conjectures.

With the futile formalities that one employs on such occasions, I tried to condole with the aged servant and offered him such assistance as I could in making the necessary arrangements for the disposition of his master's remains. Since there was no telephone in the house, I volunteered to find a doctor who would examine the body and sign the death certificate. The old man seemed to feel a singular relief and gratitude.

"Thank you, sir," he said fervently. Then, as if in explanation: "I don't want to leave Sir John — I promised him that I'd keep a close watch over his body."

He went on to speak of Sir John's desire for cremation. It seemed that the baronet had left explicit directions for the building of a pyre of driftwood on the hill behind the Hall, the burning of his remains on this pyre, and the sowing of his ashes on the fields of the estate. These directions he had enjoined and empowered the manservant to carry out as soon after death as possible. No one was to be present at the ceremony except Harper and the hired pallbearers, and Sir John's nearer relatives — none of whom lived in the vicinity — were not to be informed of his demise till all was over.

I refused Harper's offer to prepare my breakfast, telling him that I could obtain a meal in the neighbouring village. There was a strange uneasiness in

his manner; and I realised with thoughts and emotions not to be specified that he was anxious to begin his promised vigil beside Sir John's corpse.

It would be tedious and unnecessary to detail the funereal afternoon that followed. The heavy sea fog had returned, and I seemed to grope my way through a sodden but unreal world as I sought the nearby town. I succeeded in locating a doctor, and also in securing several men to build the pyre and act as pallbearers. I was met everywhere with an odd taciturnity, and no one seemed willing to comment on Sir John's death or to speak of the dark legendry that was attached to Tremoth Hall.

Harper, to my amazement, had proposed that the cremation should take place at once, but this proved to be impracticable. When all the formalities and arrangements had been completed the fog turned into a steady, everlasting downpour which rendered impossible the lighting of the pyre, and we were compelled to defer the ceremony. I had promised Harper that I should remain at the Hall till all was done; and so it was that I spent a second night beneath that roof of accursed secrets.

The darkness came on betimes. After a last visit to the village, in which I procured some sandwiches in lieu of dinner, I returned to the lonely Hall. I was met by Harper on the stairs as I ascended to the death-chamber. There was an increased agitation in his manner, as if something had happened to frighten him.

"I wonder if you'd keep me company to-night, Mr. Chaldane," he said. "It's a gruesome watch that I'm asking you to share, and it may be a dangerous one. But Sir John would thank you, I am sure. If you have a weapon of any sort, it will be well to bring it with you."

It was impossible to refuse his request, and I assented at once. I was unarmed, so Harper insisted on equipping me with an antique revolver of which he himself carried the mate.

“Look here, Harper,” I said bluntly, as we followed the hall to Sir John’s chamber, “what are you afraid of?”

He flinched visibly at the question and seemed unwilling to answer. Then, after a moment, he appeared to realise that frankness was necessary.

“It’s the thing in the barred room,” he explained. “You must have heard it, sir. We’ve had the care of it, Sir John and I, these eight and twenty years, and we’ve always feared that it might break out. It never gave us much trouble — as long as we kept it well fed. But for the last three nights it has been scratching at the thick oaken wall of Sir John’s chamber, which is something it never did before. Sir John thought it knew that he was going to die, and that it wanted to reach his body — being hungry for other food than we had given it. That’s why we must guard him closely to-night, Mr. Chaldane. I pray to God that the wall will hold; but the thing keeps on clawing and clawing, like a demon, and I don’t like the hollowness of the sound — as if the wall were getting thin.”

Appalled by this confirmation of my own repugnant surmise, I could offer no rejoinder. With Harper’s open avowal, the abnormality took on a darker and more encroaching shadow. Willingly I would have foregone the promised vigil — but this, of course, it was impossible to do. The bestial, diabolic scratching, louder and more frantic than before, assailed my ears as we passed the barred room, and all too readily I understood the nameless fear that had impelled the old man to request my company. The sound was inexpressibly alarming with its grim macabre insistence, its intimation of ghoulish hunger; and it became even plainer, with a hideous, tearing vibrancy, when we entered the room of death.

During the whole course of that day I had refrained from visiting this chamber, since I am lacking in the morbid curiosity which impels many to gaze upon the dead. So it was that I beheld my host for the second and last

time. Fully dressed and prepared for the pyre, he lay on the chill white bed, whose heavily figured curtains had been drawn back. The room was lit by several tall tapers arranged on a little table in curious brazen candelabrae that were greened with antiquity, but the light seemed to afford only a doubtful, dolorous glimmering in the drear spaciousness.

Somewhat against my will I gazed on the dead features, and averted my eyes very hastily. I was prepared for the stony pallor and rigor, but not for the full betrayal of that hideous revulsion, that inhuman terror and horror which must have corroded the man's heart through infernal years, and which with almost superhuman control he had masked from the casual beholder of life. The revelation was too painful, and I could not look at him again. In a sense it seemed that he was not dead; that he was still listening with agonised attention to the dreadful sounds that might well have served to precipitate the final attack of his malady.

There were several chairs dating, I think, like the bed itself, from the seventeenth century. Harper and I seated ourselves near the small table between the death-bed and the panelled wall of blackish wood from which the ceaseless clawing sound seemed to issue. In tacit silence, with drawn and cocked revolvers, we began our ghastly vigil.

As we sat and waited, I was driven to picture the unnamed monstrosity, and half-formed images of charnel nightmare pursued each other in chaotic succession through my mind. An atrocious curiosity to which I should normally have been a stranger prompted me to question Harper, but I was restrained by an even more powerful inhibition. On his part, the old man volunteered no information or comment whatever, but watched the wall with fear-bright eyes that did not seem to waver in his palsy-nodding head.

It would be impossible to convey the suspense and baleful expectation of the hours that followed. The woodwork must have been of great thickness

and hardness, such as would have defied the assaults of any normal creature equipped only with talons or teeth; but in spite of such obvious arguments as these, I thought momentarily to see it crumble inward. The scratching noise went on eternally, and to my fertile fancy, grew sharper and nearer every instant. At recurrent intervals I seemed to hear a low, eager, doglike whining such as a ravenous animal would make when it neared the goal of its burrowing.

Neither of us had spoken of what we should do in case the monster should attain its objective, but there seemed to be an unvoiced agreement. However, with a superstitiousness of which I should not have believed myself capable, I began to wonder if the monster possessed enough of humanity in its composition to be vulnerable to mere revolver bullets. To what extent would it display the traits of its unknown and fabulous paternity? I tried to convince myself that such questions and wonderings were patently absurd, but was drawn to them again and again, as if by the allurements of some forbidden gulf.

The night wore on, like the flowing of a dark, sluggish stream, and the tall funeral tapers had burned to within an inch of their verdigris-eaten sockets. It was this circumstance alone that gave me an idea of the passage of time; for I seemed to be drowning in a black eternity, motionless beneath the seething of blind horrors. I had grown so accustomed to the clawing noise in the woodwork that I deemed its ever-growing sharpness and hollowness a mere hallucination; and so it was that the end of our vigil came without apparent warning.

Suddenly, as I stared at the wall and listened with frozen fixity, I heard a harsh, splintering sound and saw that a narrow strip had broken loose and was hanging from the panel. Then, before I could collect myself or credit

the awful witness of my senses, a large semi-circular portion of the wall collapsed in many splinters beneath the impact of some ponderous body.

Mercifully, perhaps, I have never been able to recall with any degree of distinctness the hellish thing that issued from the panel. The visual shock, by its own excess of horror, has almost blotted the details from memory. I have, however, the blurred impression of a huge whitish, hairless and semi-quadruped body, of canine teeth in a half-human face, and long hyena nails at the end of forelimbs that were both arms and legs. A charnel stench preceded the apparition, like a breath from the den of some carrion-eating animal; and then, with a single nightmare leap, the thing was upon us.

I heard the staccato crack of Harper's revolver, sharp and vengeful in the closed room, but there was only a rusty click from my own weapon. Perhaps the cartridge was too old; at any rate, it had misfired, and before I could press the trigger again I was hurled to the floor with terrific violence, striking my head against the heavy base of the little table. A black curtain spangled with countless fires appeared to fall upon me and blot the room from sight. Then all the fires went out, and there was only darkness.

Again, slowly, I became conscious of flame and shadow; but the flame was bright and flickering, and seemed to grow ever more brilliant. Then my dull, doubtful senses were sharply revived and clarified by the acrid odour of burning cloth. The features of the room returned to vision, and I found that I was lying huddled against the overthrown table, gazing toward the death-bed. The guttering candles had been hurled to the floor. One of them was eating a slow circle of fire in the carpet beside me, and another, spreading, had ignited the bed-curtains, which were flaring swiftly upward to the great canopy. Even as I lay staring, ruddy tatters of the burning fabric fell upon the bed in a dozen places, and the body of Sir John Tremoth was ringed about with starting flames.

I staggered heavily to my feet, dazed and giddy with the fall that had hurled me into oblivion. The room was empty except for the old manservant, who lay near the door, moaning indistinctly. The door itself stood open, as if someone — or something — had gone out during my period of unconsciousness.

I turned again to the bed, with some instinctive, half-formed intention of trying to extinguish the blaze. The flames were spreading rapidly, but they were not swift enough to veil from my sickened eyes the hands and features — if one could any longer call them such — of that which had been Sir John Tremoth. Of the last horror that had overtaken him I must forbear explicit mention, and I would that I could likewise avoid the remembrance. All too tardily had the monster been frightened away by the fire...

There is little more to tell. Looking back once more as I reeled from the smoke-laden room with Harper in my arms, I saw that the bed and its canopy had become a mass of mounting flames. The unhappy baronet had found in his own death-chamber the funeral pyre for which he had longed.

It was nearly dawn when we emerged from the doomed house. The rain had ceased, leaving a heaven lined with high and dead-grey clouds. The chill air appeared to revive the aged manservant, and he stood feebly beside me, uttering not a word, as we watched an ever-climbing spire of flame that broke from the sombre roof of Tremoth Hall and began to cast a sullen glare on the unkempt hedges.

In the combined light of the fireless dawn and the lurid conflagration, we both saw at our feet the semi-human, monstrous footprints, with their mark of long and ghoulish nails, that had been trodden freshly and deeply in the wet soil. They came from the direction of the house and ran toward the heath-clad hill that rose behind it. Still without speaking, we followed the steps. Almost without interruption, they led to the entrance of the ancient

family vaults, to the heavy iron door in the hillside that had been closed for a full generation by Sir John Tremoth's order. The door itself swung open, and we saw that its rusty chain and lock had been shattered by a strength that was more than the strength of man or beast. Then, peering within, we saw the clay-touched outline of the unreturning footprints that went downward into mausolean darkness on the stairs.

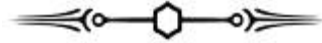
We were both weaponless, having left our revolvers behind us in the death-chamber, but we did not hesitate long. Harper possessed a liberal supply of matches; and looking about, I found a heavy billet of water-soaked wood which might serve in lieu of a cudgel. In grim silence, with tacit determination and forgetful of any danger, we conducted a thorough search of the well-nigh interminable vaults, striking match after match as we went on in the musty shadows.

The traces of ghoulish footsteps grew fainter as we followed them into those black recesses; and we found nothing anywhere but noisome dampness and undisturbed cobwebs and the countless coffins of the dead. The thing that we sought had vanished utterly, as if swallowed up by the subterranean walls. At last we returned to the entrance. There, as we stood blinking in the full daylight, with grey and haggard faces, Harper spoke for the first time, saying in his slow, tremulous voice:

“Many years ago — soon after Lady Agatha's death — Sir John and I searched the vaults from end to end, but we could find no trace of the thing we suspected. Now, as then, it is useless to seek. There are mysteries which, God helping, will never be fathomed. We know only that the offspring of the vaults has gone back to the vaults. There may it remain.”

Silently, in my shaken heart, I echoed his wish.

The Witchcraft of Ulua



SABMON THE ANCHORITE was famed no less for his piety than for his prophetic wisdom and knowledge of the dark art of sorcery. He had dwelt alone for two generations in a curious house on the rim of the northern desert of Tasuun: a house whose floor and walls were built from the large bones of dromedaries, and whose roof was a wattling composed of the smaller bones of wild dogs and men and hyenas. These ossuary relics, chosen for their whiteness and symmetry, were bound securely together with well-tanned thongs, and were joined and fitted with marvelous closeness, leaving no space for the blown sand to penetrate. This house was the pride of Sabmon, who swept it daily with a besom of mummy's hair, till it shone immaculate as polished ivory both within and without.

Despite his remoteness and reclusion, and the hardships that attended a journey to his abode, Sabmon was much consulted by the people of Tasuun, and was even sought by pilgrims from the farther shores of Zothique. However, though not ungracious or inhospitable, he often ignored the queries of his visitors, who, as a rule, wished merely to divine the future or to ask advice concerning the most advantageous government of their affairs. He became more and more taciturn with age, and spoke little with men in his last years. It was said, perhaps not untruly, that he preferred to talk with the murmuring palms about his well, or the wandering stars that went over his hermitage.

In the summer of Sabmon's ninety-third year, there came to him the youth Amalzain, his great-nephew, and the son of a niece that Sabmon had

loved dearly in days before his retirement to a gymnosophic seclusion. Amalzain, who had spent all of his one-and-twenty years in the upland home of his parents, was on his way to Miraab, the capital of Tasuun, where he would serve as a cup-bearer to Famorgh the king. This post, obtained for him by influential friends of his father, was much coveted among the youth of the land, and would lead to high advancement if he were fortunate enough to win the king's favor. In accord with his mother's wish, he had come to visit Sabmon and to ask the counsel of the sage regarding various problems of worldly conduct.

Sabmon, whose eyes were undimmed by age and astronomy and much poring over volumes of archaic ciphers, was pleased with Amalzain and found in the boy something of his mother's beauty. And for this reason he gave freely of his hoarded wisdom; and, after uttering many profound and pertinent maxims, he said to Amalzain:

"It is indeed well that you have come to me: for, innocent of the world's turpitude, you fare to a city of strange sins and strange witcheries and sorceries. There are numerous evils in Miraab. Its women are witches and harlots, and their beauty is a foulness wherein the young, the strong, the valiant, are limed and taken."

Then, ere Amalzain departed, Sabmon gave to him a small amulet of silver, graven curiously with the migniard skeleton of a girl. And Sabmon said:

"I counsel you to wear this amulet at all times henceforward. It contains a pinch of ashes from the pyre of Yos Ebni, sage and archimage, who won supremacy over men and demons in elder years by defying all mortal temptation and putting down the insubordination of the flesh. There is a virtue in these ashes, and they will protect you from such evils as were overcome by Yos Ebni. And yet, peradventure, there are ills and

enchantments in Miraab from which the amulet can not defend you. In such case you must return to me. I shall watch over you carefully, and shall know all that occurs to you in Miraab: for I have long since become the owner of certain rare faculties of sight and hearing whose exercise is not debarred or limited by mere distance.”

Amalzain, being ignorant of the matters at which Sabmon hinted, was somewhat bewildered by this peroration. But he received the amulet gratefully. Then, bidding Sabmon a reverential farewell, he resumed his journey to Miraab, wondering much as to the fortune that would befall him in that sinful and many-legended city.

Famorgh, who had grown old and senile amid his debaucheries, was the ruler of an aging, semi-desert land; and his court was a place of farsought luxury, of obliquitous refinement and corruption. The youth Amalzain, accustomed only to the simple manners, the rude virtues and vices of country-dwelling folk, was dazzled at first by the sybaritic life around him. But a certain innate strength of character, fortified by the moral teachings of his parents and the precepts of his great-uncle, Sabmon, preserved him from any grave errors or lapses.

Thus it was that he served as a cup-bearer at bachannalian revels, but remained abstemious throughout, pouring night after night in the ruby-crusted cup of Famorgh the maddening wines that were drugged with cannabis and the stupefying arrack with its infusion of poppy. With untainted heart and flesh he beheld the infamous mummeries whereby the courtiers, vying with each other in shamelessness, attempted to lighten the king’s ennui. Feeling only wonder or disgust, he watched the nimble and lascivious contortions of black dancers from Dooza Thom in the north, or saffron-bodied girls from the southern isles. His parents, who believed implicitly in the superhuman goodness of monarchs, had not prepared him

for this spectacle of royal vice; but the reverence they had instilled so thoroughly into Amalzain led him to regard it all as being the peculiar but mysterious prerogative of the kings of Tasuun.

During his first month in Miraab, Amalzain heard much of the Princess Ulua, sole daughter of Famorgh and Queen Lunalia; but since the women of the royal family seldom attended the banquets or appeared in public, he did not see her. The huge and shadowy palace, however, was filled with whispers concerning her amours. Ulua, he was told, had inherited the sorceries of her mother Lunalia, whose dark, luxurious beauty, so often sung by bewitched poets, was now fallen to a haggish decrepitude. The lovers of Ulua were innumerable, and she often procured their passion or insured their fidelity by other charms than those of her person. Though little taller than a child, she was exquisitely formed and endowed with the loveliness of some female demon that might haunt the slumbers of youth. She was feared by many and her ill will was deemed a dangerous thing. Famorgh, no less blind to her sins and witcheries than he had been to those of Lunalia, indulged her in all ways and denied her nothing.

Amalzain's duties left him much idle time, for Famorgh usually slept the double sleep of age and intoxication after the evening revels. Much of this time he gave to the study of algebra and the reading of olden poems and romances. One morning, while he was engaged with certain algebraic calculations, there came to Amalzain a huge negress who had been pointed out to him as one of Ulua's waiting-women. She told him peremptorily that he was to follow her to the apartments of Ulua. Bewildered and amazed by this singular interruption of his studies, he was unable to reply for a moment. Thereupon, seeing his hesitation, the great black woman lifted him in her naked arms and carried him easily from the room and through the palace halls. Angry, and full of discomfiture, he found himself deposited in

a chamber hung with shameless designs, where, amid the fuming of aphrodisiac vapors, the princess regarded him with luxurious gravity from a couch of fire-bright scarlet. She was small as a woman of the elf-folk, and voluptuous as a coiled lamia. The incense floated about her like sinuous veils.

“There are other things than the pouring of wine for a sottish monarch, or the study of worm-eaten volumes,” said Ulua in a voice that was like the flowing of hot honey. “Sir cup-bearer, your youth should have a better employment than these.”

“I ask no employment, other than my duties and studies,” replied Amalzain ungraciously. “But tell me, O princess, what is your will? Why has your serving-woman brought me here in a fashion so unseemly?”

“For a youth so erudite and clever, the question should be needless,” answered Ulua, smiling obliquely. “See you not that I am beautiful and desirable? Or can it be that your perceptions are duller than I had thought?”

“I do not doubt that you are beautiful,” said the boy, “but such matters hardly concern a humble cup-bearer.”

The vapors, mounting thickly from golden thuribles before the couch, were parted with a motion as of drawn draperies; and Amalzain lowered his gaze before the enchantress, who shook with a soft laughter that made the jewels upon her bosom twinkle like living eyes.

“It would seem that those musty volumes have indeed blinded you,” she told him. “You have need of that euphrasy which purges the sight. Go now: but return presently — of your own accord.”

For many days thereafter, Amalzain, going about his duties as usual, was aware of a strange haunting. It seemed now that Ulua was everywhere. Appearing at the revels, as if by some new caprice, she flaunted her evil beauty in the eyes of the young cup-bearer; and often, by day, he met her in

the palace gardens and corridors. All men spoke of her, as if conspiring tacitly to keep her in his thoughts; and it seemed that even the heavy arras whispered her name as they rustled in the lost winds that wandered through the gloomy and interminable halls.

This, however, was not all: for her undesired image began to trouble his nightly dreams; and awakening, he heard the warm dulcet languor of her voice, and felt the caress of light and subtle fingers in the darkness. Peering at the pale moon that waxed beyond the windows, above the black cypresses, he saw her dead, corroded face assume the living features of Ulua. The lithe and migniard form of the young witch appeared to move among the fabulous queens and goddesses that thronged the opulent hangings with their amours. Beheld as if through enchantment, her face leaned beside his in the mirrors; and she came and vanished, phantom-like, with seductive murmurs and wanton gestures, as he bent over his books. But though he was perturbed by these appearances, in which he could scarce distinguish the real from the illusory, Amalzain was still indifferent toward Ulua, being surely protected from her charms by the amulet containing the ashes of Yos Ebni, saint and sage and archimage. From certain curious flavors detected more than once in his food and drink, he suspected that the love-potions for which she had become infamous were being administered to him; but beyond a light and passing qualmishness, he experienced no ill effect whatever; and he was wholly ignorant of the spells woven against him in secret, and the thrice-lethal involtutions that were designed to wound his heart and senses.

Now (though he knew it not) his indifference was a matter of much gossip at the court. Men marvelled greatly at such exemption: for all whom the princess had chosen heretofore, whether captains, cup-bearers or high dignitaries, or common soldiers and grooms, had yielded easily to her

bewitchments. So it came to pass that Ulua was angered, since all men knew that her beauty was scorned by Amalzain, and her sorcery was impotent to ensnare him. Thereupon she ceased to appear at the revels of Famorgh; and Amalzain beheld her no longer in the halls and gardens; and neither his dreams nor his waking hours were haunted any more by the spell-wrought semblance of Ulua. So, in his innocence, he rejoiced as one who has encountered a grave peril and has come forth unharmed.

Then, later, on a moonless night, as he lay sleeping tranquilly in the moonless hours before dawn, there came to him in his dream a figure muffled from crown to heel with the vestments of the tomb. Tall as a caryatid, awful and menacing, it leaned above him in silence more malignant than any curse; and the cerements fell open at the breast, and charnel-worms and death-scarabs and scorpions, together with shreds of rotting flesh, rained down upon Amalzain. Then, as he awoke from his nightmare, sick and stifled, he breathed a carrion feter, and felt against him the pressure of a still, heavy body. Affrighted, he rose and lit the lamp; but the bed was empty. Yet the odor of putrefaction still lingered; and Amalzain could have sworn that the corpse of a woman, two weeks dead and teeming with maggots, had laid closely at his side in the darkness.

Thereafter, for many nights, his slumbers were broken by such foulnesses as this. Hardly could he sleep at all for the horror of that which came and went, invisible but palpable, in his chamber. Always he awoke from ill dreams, to find about him the stiffened arms of long-dead succubi, or to feel at his side the amorous trembling of fleshless skeletons. He was choked by the natron and bitumen of mummied breasts; he was crushed by the unremoving weight of gigantic lichens; he was kissed nauseously by lips that were oozing tatters of corruption.

Nor was this all; for other abominations came to him by day, visible and perceived through all his senses, and more loathsome even than the dead. Things that seemed as the leavings of leprosy crawled before him at high noon in the halls of Famorgh; and they rose up from the shadows and sidled toward him, leering whitely with faces that were no longer faces, and trying to caress him with their half-eaten fingers. About his ankles, as he went to and fro, there clung lascivious empusae with breasts that were furred like the bat; and serpent-bodied lamiae minched and pirouetted before his eyes, like the dancers before the king.

No longer could he read his books or solve his problems of algebra in peace: for the letters changed from moment to moment beneath his scrutiny and were twisted into runes of evil meaning; and the signs and ciphers he had written were turned into devils no bigger than large emmets, that writhed foully across the paper as if on a field, performing those rites which are acceptable only to Alila, queen of perdition and goddess of all iniquities.

Thus plagued and bedevilled, the youth Amalzain was near to madness; yet he dared not complain or speak to others of aught that he beheld; for he knew that these horrors, whether immaterial or substantial, were perceived only by himself. Nightly, for the full period of a moon, he lay with dead things in his chamber; and daily, in all his comings and goings, he was besought by abhorrent specters. And he doubted not that all these were the sendings of Ulua, angered by his refusal of her love; and he remembered that Sabmon had hinted darkly of certain enchantments from which the ashes of Yes Ebni, preserved in the silver amulet, might be powerless to defend him. And, knowing that such enchantments were upon him now, he recalled the final injunction of the old archimage.

So, feeling that there was no help for him save in the wizardry of Sabmon, he went before King Famorgh and begged a short leave of absence

from the court. And Famorgh, who was well pleased with the cup-bearer, and moreover had begun to note his thinness and pallor, granted the request readily.

Mounted on a palfrey chosen for speed and endurance, Amalzain rode northward from Miraab on a sultry morning in autumn. A strange heaviness had stilled all the air; and great coppery clouds were piled like towering, many-domed palaces of genii on the desert hills. The sun appeared to swim in molten brass. No vultures flew on the silent heavens; and the very jackals had retired to their lairs, as if in fear of some unknown doom. But Amalzain, riding swiftly toward Sabmon's hermitage, was haunted still by leprous larvae that rose before him, posturing foully on the dun sands; and he heard the desirous moaning of succubi under the hooves of his horse.

The night waylaid him, airless and starless, as he came to a well amid dying palms. Here he lay sleepless, with the curse of Ulua still upon him: for it seemed that the dry, dusty lichens of desert tombs reclined rigidly at his side; and bony fingers wooed him toward the unfathomable sand-pits from which they had risen.

Wearied and devil-ridden, he reached the wattled house of Sabmon at noon of the next day. The sage greeted him affectionately, showing no surprise, and listened to his story with the air of one who harkens a twice-told tale.

"These things, and more, were known to me from the beginning," he said to Amalzain. "I could have saved you from the sendings of Ulua ere now; but it was my wish that you should come to me at this time, forsaking the court of the dotard Famorgh and the evil city of Miraab, whose iniquities are now at the full. The imminent doom of Miraab, though unread by her astrologers, has been declared in the heavens; and I would not that you should share the doom."

“It is needful,” he went on, “that the spells of Ulua should be broken on this very day, and the sendings returned to her that sent them; since otherwise they would haunt you for ever, remaining as a visible and tangible plague when the witch herself has gone to her black lord, Thasaidon, in the seventh hell.”

Then, to the wonderment of Amalzain, the old magician brought forth from a cabinet of ivory an elliptic mirror of dark and burnished metal and placed it before him. The mirror was held aloft by the muffled hands of a veiled image; and peering within it, Amalzain saw neither his own face nor the face of Sabmon, nor aught of the room itself reflected. And Sabmon enjoined him to watch the mirror closely, and then repaired to a small oratory that was curtained from the chamber with long and queerly painted rolls of camel-parchment.

Watching the mirror, Amalzain was aware that certain of the sendings of Ulua came and went beside him, striving ever to gain his attention with unclean gestures such as harlots use. But resolutely he fixed his eyes on the void and unreflecting metal; and anon he heard the voice of Sabmon chanting without pause the powerful words of an antique formula of exorcism; and now from between the oratory curtains there issued the intolerable pungency of burning spices, such as are employed to drive away demons.

Then Amalzain perceived, without lifting his eyes from the mirror, that the sendings of Ulua had vanished like vapors blown away by the desert wind. But in the mirror a scene limned itself darkly, and he seemed to look on the marble towers of the city of Miraab beneath overlooming bastions of ominous cloud. Then the scene shifted, and he saw the palace hall where Famorgh nodded in wine-stained purple, senile and drunken, amid his ministers and sycophants. Again the mirror changed, and he beheld a room

with tapestries of shameless design, where, on a couch of fire-bright crimson, the Princess Ulua sat with her latest lovers amid the fuming of golden thuribles.

Marvelling as he peered within the mirror, Amalzain witnessed a strange thing; for the vapors of the thuribles, mounting thickly and voluminously, took from instant to instant the form of those very apparitions by which he had been bedevilled so long. Ever they rose and multiplied, till the chamber teemed with the spawn of hell and the vomitings of the riven charnel. Between Ulua and the lover at her right hand, who was a captain of the king's guard, there coiled a monstrous lamia, enfolding them both in its serpentine volumes and crushing them with its human bosom; and close at her left hand appeared a half-eaten corpse, leering with lipless teeth, from whose cerements worms were sifted upon Ulua and her second lover, who was a royal equerry. And, swelling like the fumes of some witches' vat, those other abominations pressed about the couch of Ulua with obscene mouthings and fingerings.

At this, like the mark of a hellish branding, horror was printed on the features of the captain and the equerry; and a terror rose in the eyes of Ulua like a pale flame ignited in sunless pits; and her breasts shuddered beneath the breast-cups. And now, in a trice, the mirrored room began to rock violently, and the censers were overturned on the tilting flags, and the shameless hangings shook and bellied like the blown sails of a vessel in storm. Great cracks appeared in the floor, and beside the couch of Ulua a chasm deepened swiftly and then widened from wall to wall. The whole chamber was riven asunder, and the princess and her two lovers, with all her loathly sendings about them, were hurled tumultuously into the chasm.

After that, the mirror darkened, and Amalzain beheld for a moment the pale towers of Miraab, tossing and falling on heavens black as adamant.

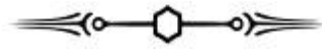
The mirror itself trembled, and the veiled image of metal supporting it began to totter and seemed about to fall; and the wattled house of Sabmon shook in the passing earthquake, but, being stoutly built, stood firm while the mansions and palaces of Miraab went down in ruin.

When the earth had ceased its long trembling, Sabmon issued from the oratory.

“It is needless to moralize on what has happened,” he said. “You have learned the true nature of carnal desire, and have likewise beheld the history of mundane corruption. Now, being wise, you will turn early to those things which are incorruptible and beyond the world.”

Thereafter, till the death of Sabmon, Amalzain dwelt with him and became his only pupil in the science of the stars and the hidden arts of enchantment and sorcery.

The Epiphany of Death



I FIND IT peculiarly difficult to express the exact nature of the sentiment which Tomeron had always evoked in me. However, I am sure that the feeling never partook, at any time, of what is ordinarily known as friendship. It was a compound of unusual esthetic and intellectual elements, and was somehow closely allied in my thoughts with the same fascination that has drawn me ever since childhood toward all things that are remote in space and time, or which have about them the irresolvable twilight of antiquity. Somehow, Tomeron seemed never to belong to the present; but one could readily have imagined him as living in some bygone age. About him, there was nothing whatever of the lineaments of our own period; and he even went so far as to affect in his costume an approximation to the garments worn several centuries ago. His complexion was extremely pale and cadaverous, and he stooped heavily from poring over ancient tomes and no less ancient maps. He moved always with the slow, meditative pace of one who dwells among far-off memories and reveries; and he spoke often of people and events and ideas that have long since been forgotten. For the most part, he was apparently unheeding of present things, and I felt that for him the huge city of Ptolemides, in which we both dwelt, with all its manifold clamor and tumult, was little more than a labyrinth of painted vapors. There was a like vagueness in the attitude of others toward Tomeron; and though he had always been accepted without question as a representative of the noble and otherwise extinct family from whom he claimed descent, nothing appeared to be known about his actual birth and antecedents. With two servants, who were both deaf-mutes, who were very

old and who likewise wore the raiment of a former age, he lived in the semi-ruinous mansion of his ancestors, where it was said, none of the family had dwelt for many generations. There he pursued the occult and recondite studies that were so congenial to his mind; and there, at certain intervals, I was wont to visit him.

I cannot recall the precise date and circumstances of the beginning of my acquaintance with Tomeron. Though I come of a hardy line that is noted for the sanity of its constitution, my faculties had been woefully shaken by the horror of the happening with which that acquaintance ended. My memory is not what it was, and there are certain lacunae for which my readers must contrive to forgive me. The only wonder is, that my powers of recollection have survived at all, beneath the hideous burden they have had to bear; for, in a more than metaphoric sense, I have been as one condemned to carry with him, at all times and in all places, the loathsome incubi of things long dead and corrupt.

I can readily recall, however, the studies to which Tomeron had devoted himself, the lost demonian volumes from Hyperborea and Mu and Atlantis with which his library shelves were heaped to the ceiling, and the queer charts, not of any land that lies above the surface of the earth, on which he pored by perpetual candle-light. I shall not speak of these studies, for they would seem too fantastic and too macabre for credibility; and that which I have to relate is incredible enough in itself; I shall speak, however, of certain strange ideas with which Tomeron was much preoccupied, and concerning which he so often discoursed to me in that deep, guttural and monotonous voice of his, that had the reverberation of unsounded caverns in its tones and cadences. He maintained that life and death were not the fixed conditions that people commonly believed them to be; that the two realms were often intermingled in ways not readily discerned, and had

penumbral border-lands; that the dead were not always the dead, nor the living the living, as such terms are habitually understood. But the manner in which he spoke of these ideas was extremely vague and general; and I could never induce him to specify his meaning or to proffer some concrete illustration that would render it more intelligible to a mentality such as mine, that unused to dealing in the cobwebs of abstraction. Behind his words, there hovered, or seemed to hover, a legion of dark, amorphous images that I could never formulate or depict to myself in any way, until the final denouement of our descent into the catacombs of Ptolemides.

I have already said that my feeling for Tomeron was never anything that could be classified as friendship. But even from the first, I was well aware that Tomeron had a curious fondness for me — a fondness whose nature I could not comprehend, and with which I could hardly even sympathize. Though he fascinated me at all times, there were occasions when my interest was not unalloyed with an actual sense of repulsion. At whiles, his pallor was too cadaverous, too suggestive of fungi that have grown in the dark, or of leprous bones by moonlight; and the stoop of his shoulders conveyed to my brain the idea that they bore a burden of centuries through which no man could conceivably have lived. He aroused always a certain awe in me; and the awe was sometimes mingled with an indeterminate fear.

I do not remember how long our acquaintance had continued; but I do remember that he spoke with increasing frequency, toward the end, of those bizarre ideas at which I have hinted. Always I felt that he was troubled about something for he often looked at me with a mournful gleam in his hollow eyes; and sometimes he would speak, with peculiar stress, of the great regard that he had for me.

And one night he said, ‘Theolus, the time is coming when you must know the truth — must know me as I am, and not as I have been permitted

to seem. There is a term to all things, and all things are obedient to inexorable laws. I would that it were otherwise, but neither I nor any man, among the living or among the dead, can lengthen at will the term of any state or condition of being, or alter the laws that decree such conditions.'

Perhaps it was well that I did not understand him, and that I was unable to attach much importance to his words or to the singular intentness of his bearing as he uttered them. For a few more days, I was spared the knowledge which I now carry.

Then one evening, Tomeron spoke thus: 'I am now compelled to ask an odd favor of you, which I hope you will grant in consideration of our long friendship. The favor is, that you accompany me this very night to those vaults of my family which lie in the catacombs of Ptolemides.'

Though much surprised by the request, and not altogether pleased, I was nevertheless unable to deny him. I could not imagine the purpose of such a visit as the one proposed; but, as was my wont, I forbore to interrogate Tomeron, and merely told him that I would accompany him to the vaults if such where his desire.

'I thank you, Theolus, for this proof of friendship,' he replied earnestly, 'Believe me, I am loath to ask it; but there has been a certain deception, an odd misunderstanding which cannot go on any longer. Tonight, you will learn the truth.'

Carrying torches, we left the mansion of Tomeron and sought the ancient catacombs of Ptolemides, which lie beyond the walls and have long been disused, for there is now a fine necropolis in the very heart of the city. The moon had gone down beyond the desert that encroaches toward the catacombs; and we were forced to light our torches long before we came to the subterranean adits; for the rays of Mars and Jupiter in a sodden and funereal sky were not enough to illumine the perilous path we followed

among mounds and fallen obelisks and broken graves. At length we discovered the dark and weed-choked entrance of the charnels; and here Tomeron led the way with a swiftness and surety of footing that bespoke long familiarity with the place.

Entering, we found ourselves in a crumbling passage where the bones of dilapidated skeletons were scattered amid the rubble that had fallen from the sides and roof. A choking stench of stagnant air and age-old corruption made me pause for an instant; but Tomeron scarcely appeared to perceive it, for he strode onward, lifting his torch and beckoning me to follow. We traversed many vaults in which mouldy bones verdigris-eaten sarcophagi were piled about the walls or strewn where desecrating thieves had left them in bygone years. The air was increasingly dank, chill and miasmal; and mephitic shadows crouched or swayed before our torches in every niche and corner. Also, as we went onward, the walls became more ruinous and the bones we saw on every hand were greener with the mould of time.

At length we rounded a sudden angle of the low cavern we were following. Here we came to vaults that evidently belonged to some noble family, for they were quite spacious and there was but one sarcophagus in each vault.

‘My ancestors and my family lie here,’ announced Tomeron.

We reached the cavern’s end and were confronted by a blank wall. At one side was the final vault, in which an empty sarcophagus stood open. The sarcophagus was wrought of the finest bronze and was richly carven.

Tomeron paused before the vault and turned to me. By the flickering, uncertain light I thought that I saw a look of strange and unaccountable distress on his features.

‘I must beg you to withdraw for a moment,’ he said, in a low and sorrowful voice. ‘Afterward, you can return.’

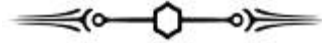
Surprised and puzzled, I obeyed his request and went slowly back along the passage for some distance. Then I returned to the place where I had left him. My surprise was heightened when I found that he had extinguished his torch and had dropped it on the threshold of the final vault. And Tomeron himself was not visible anywhere.

Entering the vault, since there was seemingly no other place where he could have hidden himself, I looked about for him, but the room was empty. At least, I thought it empty till I looked again at the richly carved sarcophagus and saw that it was now tenanted, for a cadaver lay within, shrouded in a winding-sheet of a sort that has not been used for centuries in Ptolemides.

I drew near to the sarcophagus, and peering into the face of the cadaver, I saw that it bore a fearful and strange resemblance to the face of Tomeron, though it was bloated and puffed with the adipocere of death and was purple with the shadows of decay. And looking again, I saw that it was indeed Tomeron.

I would have screamed aloud with the horror that came upon me; but my lips were benumbed and frozen and I could only whisper Tomeron's name. But as I whispered it, the lips of the cadaver seemed to part, and the tip of its tongue protruded between them. And I thought that the tip trembled, as if Tomeron were about to speak and answer me. But gazing more closely, I saw that the trembling was merely the movement of worms as they twisted up and down and to and fro and sought to crowd each other from Tomeron's tongue.

A Vintage from Atlantis



I THANK YOU, friend, but I am no drinker of wine, not even if it be the rarest Canary or the oldest Amontillado. Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging... and more than others, I have reason to know the truth that was writ by Solomon the Jewish king. Give ear, if ye will, and I shall tell you a story such as would halt the half-drained cup on the lips of the hardiest bibber.

We were seven-and-thirty buccaneers, who raked the Spanish Main under Barnaby Dwale, he that was called Red Barnaby for the spilling of blood that attended him everywhere. Our ship, the *Black Falcon*, could outfly and outstrike all other craft that flew the Jolly Roger. Full often, Captain Dwale was wont to seek a remote isle on the eastward verge of the West Indies, and lighten the vessel of its weight of ingots and doubloons.

The isle was far from the common course of maritime traffic, and was not known to maps or other mariners; so it suited our purpose well. It was a place of palms and sand and cuffs, with a small harbor sheltered by the curving outstretched arms of rugged reefs, on which the dark ocean climbed and gnashed its fangs of white foam without troubling the tranquil waters beyond. I know not how many times we had visited the isle; but the soil beneath many a coco tree was heavy with our hidden trove. There we had stored the loot of bullion-laden ships, the massy plate and jewels of cathedral towns.

Even as to all mortal things, an ending came at last to our visits. We had gathered a goodly cargo, but might have stayed longer on the open main where the Spaniards passed, if a tempest had not impended. We were near

the secret isle, as it chanced, when the skies began to blacken; and wallowing heavily in the rising seas we fled to our placid harbor, reaching it by night-fall. Before dawn the hurricane had blown by; and the sun came up in cloudless amber and blue. We proceeded with the landing and burying of our chests of coin and gems and ingots, which was a task of some length; and afterward we refilled our water-casks at a cool sweet spring that ran from beneath the palmy hill not far inland.

It was now midafternoon. Captain Dwale was planning to weigh anchor shortly and follow the westering sun toward the Caribbees. There were nine of us, loading the last barrels into the boats, with Red Barnaby looking on and cursing us for being slower than mud-turtles; and we were bending knee-deep in the tepid, lazy water, when suddenly the captain ceased to swear, and we saw that he was no longer watching us. He had turned his back and was stooping over a strange object that must have drifted in with the tide, after the storm: a huge and barnacle-laden thing that lay on the sand, half in and half out of the shoaling water. Somehow, none of us had perceived it hereto-fore.

Red Barnaby was not silent long.

“Come here, ye chancre-eaten coistrels,” he called to us. We obeyed willingly enough, and gathered around the beached object, which our captain was examining with much perplexity. We too were greatly bewildered when we saw the thing more closely; and none of us could name it offhand or with certainty.

The object had the form of a great jar, with a tapering neck and a deep, round, abdomens body. It was wholly encrusted with shells and corals that had gathered upon it as if through many ages in the ocean deeps, and was festooned with weeds and sea-flowers such as we had never before beheld; so that we could not determine the substance of which it was made.

At the order of Captain Dwale, we rolled it out of the water and beyond reach of the tide, into the shade of nearby palms; though it required the efforts of four men to move the unwieldy thing, which was strangely ponderous. We found that it would stand easily on end, with its top reaching almost to the shoulders of a tall man. While we were handling the great jar, we heard a swishing noise from within, as if it were filled with some sort of liquor.

Our captain, as it chanced, was a learned man.

“By the communion cup of Satan!” he swore. “If this thing is not an antique wine-jar, then I am a Bed-lamite. Such vessels-though mayhap they were not so huge, were employed by the Romans to store the goodly vintages of Falernus and Cecuba. Indeed, there is today a Spanish wine — that of Valdepenas — which is kept in earthen jars. But this, if I mistake not, is neither from Spain nor olden Rome. It is ancient enough, by its look, to have come from that long-sunken isle, the Atlantis whereof Plato speaks. Truly, there should be a rare vintage within, a wine that was mellowed in the youth of the world, before the founding of Rome and Athens; and which, perchance, has gathered fire and strength with the centuries. Ho! my rascal sea-bullies! We sail not from this harbor till the jar is broached. And if the liquor within be sound and potable, we shall make holiday this evening on the sands.”

“Belike, ’tis a funeral urn, full of plaguey cinders and ashes,” said the mate, Roger Aglone, who had a gloomy turn of thought.

Red Barnaby had drawn his cutlas and was busily prying away the crust of barnacles and quaint fantastic coral-growths from the top of the jar. Layer on layer of them he removed, and swore mightily at this increment of forgotten years. At last a great stopper of earthen-ware, sealed with a clear wax that had grown harder than amber, was revealed by his prying. The

stopper was graven with queer letters of an unknown language, plainly to be seen; but the wax refused the cutlas — point. So, losing all patience, the captain seized a mighty fragment of stone, which a lesser man could scarce have lifted, and broke therewith the neck of the jar.

Now even in those days, I, Stephen Magbane, the one Puritan amid that Christless crew, was no bibber of wine or spirituous liquors, but a staunch Rechabite on all occasions. Therefore I held back, feeling little concern other than that of reprobation, while the others pressed about the jar and sniffed greedily at the contents. But, almost immediately with its opening, my nostrils were assailed by an odor of heathen spices, heavy and strange; and the very inhalation thereof caused me to feel a sort of giddiness, so that I thought it well to retreat still further. But the others were eager as midges around a fermenting-vat in autumn.

“‘Sblood! ’Tis a royal vintage!” roared the captain, after he had dipped a forefinger in the jar and sucked the purple drops that dripped from it. “Avast, ye slumgullions! Stow the water-casks on board, and summon all hands ashore, leaving only a watch there to ward the vessel. We’ll have a gala night before we sack any more Spaniards.”

We obeyed his order; and there was much rejoicing amid the crew of the *Black Falcon* at the news of our find and the postponement of the voyage. Three men, grumbling sorely at their absence from the revels, were left on board; though, in that tranquil harbor, such vigilance was virtually needless. We others returned to the shore, bringing a supply of pannikins in which to serve the wine, and provisions for a feast. Then we gathered pieces of drift with which to build a great fire, and caught several huge tortoises along the sands, and unearthed their hidden eggs, so that we might have an abundance and variety of victuals.

In these preparations I took part with no special ardor. Knowing my habit of abstention, and being of a somewhat malicious and tormenting humor, Captain Dwale had expressly commanded my presence at the feast. However, I anticipated nothing more than a little ribaldry at my expense, as was customary at such times; and being partial to fresh tortoise-meat, I was not wholly unresigned to my lot as a witness of the Babylonian inebrieties of the others.

At nightfall, the feasting and drinking began; and the fire of driftwood, with eery witch-colors of blue and green and white amid the flame, leapt high in the dusk while the sunset died to a handful of red embers far on purpling seas.

It was a strange wine that the crew and captain swilled from their pannikins. I saw that the stuff was thick and dark, as if it had been mingled with blood; and the air was filled with the reek of those pagan spices, hot and rich and unholy, that might have poured from a broken tomb of antique emperors. And stranger still was the intoxication of that wine; for those who drank it became still and thoughtful and sullen; and there was no singing of lewd songs, no playing of apish antics.

Red Barnaby had been drinking longer than the others, having begun to sample the vintage while the crew were making ready for their revel. To our wonderment, he ceased to swear at us after the first cupful, and no longer ordered us about or paid us any heed, but sat peering into the sunset with eyes that held the dazzlement of unknown dreams. And one by one, as they began to drink, the others were likewise affected, so that I marvelled much at the unwonted power of the wine. I had never before beheld an intoxication of such nature; for they spoke not nor ate, and moved only to refill their cups from the mighty jar.

The night had grown dark as indigo beyond the flickering fire, and there was no moon; and the firelight blinded the stars. But one by one, after an interval, the drinkers rose from their places and stood staring into the darkness toward the sea. Unquietly they stood, and strained forward, peering intently as men who behold some marvelous thing; and queerly they muttered to one another, with unintelligible words. I knew not why they stared and muttered thus, unless it were because of some madness that had come upon them from the wine; for naught was visible in the dark, and I heard nothing, save the low murmur of wavelets lapping on the sand.

Louder grew the muttering; and some raised their hands and pointed seaward, babbling wildly as if in delirium. Noting their demeanor, and doubtful as to what further turn their madness might take, I bethought me to withdraw along the shore. But when I began to move away, those who were nearest me appeared to waken from their dream, and restrained me with rough hands. Then, with drunken, gibbering words, of which I could make no sense, they held me helpless while one of their number forced me to drink from a pannikin filled with the purple wine.

I fought against them, doubly unwilling to quaff that nameless vintage, and much of it was spilled. The stuff was sweet as liquid honey to the taste, but burned like hell-fire in my throat. I turned giddy; and a sort of dark confusion possessed my senses by degrees; and I seemed to hear and see and feel as in the mounting fever of calenture.

The air about me seemed to brighten, with a redness of ghostly blood that was everywhere; a light that came not from the fire nor from the nocturnal heavens. I beheld the faces and forms of the drinkers, standing without shadow, as if mantled with a rosy phosphorescence. And beyond them, where they stared in troubled and restless wonder, the darkness was illumed with the strange light.

Mad and unholy was the vision that I saw: for the harbor waves no longer lapped on the sand, and the sea had wholly vanished. The *Black Falcon* was gone, and where the reefs had been, great marble walls ascended, flushed as if with the ruby of lost sunsets. Above them were haughty domes of heathen temples, and spires of pagan palaces; and beneath were mighty streets and causeys where people passed in a never-ending throng. I thought that I gazed upon some immemorial city, such as had flourished in Earth's prime; and I saw the trees of its terraced gardens, fairer than the palms of Eden. Listening, I heard the sound of dulcimers that were sweet as the moaning of women; and the cry of horns that told forgotten glorious things; and the wild sweet singing of people who passed to some hidden, sacred festival within the walls.

I saw that the light poured upward from the city, and was born of its streets and buildings. It blinded the heavens above; and the horizon beyond was lost in a shining mist. One building there was, a high fane above the rest, from which the light streamed in a muddier flood; and from its open portals music came, sorcerous and beguiling as the far voices of bygone years. And the revellers passed gayly into its portals, but none came forth. The weird music seemed to call me and entice me; and I longed to tread the streets of the alien city, and a deep desire was upon me to mingle with its people and pass into the glowing fane.

Verily I knew why the drinkers had stared at the darkness and had muttered among themselves in wonder. I knew that they also longed to descend into the city. And I saw that a great causey, built of marble and gleaming with the red luster, ran downward from their very feet over meadows of unknown blossoms to the foremost buildings.

Then, as I watched and listened, the singing grew sweeter, the music stranger, and the rosy luster brightened. Then, with no backward glance, no

word or gesture of injunction to his men, Captain Dwale went slowly forward, treading the marble causey like a dreamer who walks in his dream. And after him, one by one, Roger Aglone and the crew followed in the same manner, going toward the city.

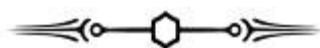
Haply I too should have followed, drawn by the witching music. For truly it seemed that I had trod the ways of that city in former time, and had known the things whereof the music told and the voices sang. Well did I remember why the people passed eternally into the fane, and why they came not forth; and there, it seemed, I should meet familiar and beloved faces, and take part in mysteries recalled from the foundered years.

All this, which the wine had remembered through its sleep in the ocean depths, was mine to behold and conceive for a moment. And well it was that I had drunk less of that evil and pagan vintage than the others, and was less besotted than they with its luring vision. For, even as Captain Dwale and his crew went toward the city, it appeared to me that the rosy glow began to fade a little. The walls took on a wavering thinness, and the domes grew insubstantial. The rose departed, the light was pale as a phosphor of the tomb; and the people went to and fro like phantoms, with a thin crying of ghostly horns and a ghostly singing. Dimly above the sunken causey the harbor waves returned; and Red Barnaby and his men walked down beneath them. Slowly the waters darkened above the fading spires and walls; and the midnight blackened upon the sea; and the city was lost like the vanished bubbles of wine.

A terror came upon me, knowing the fate of those others. I fled swiftly, stumbling in darkness toward the palmy hill that crowned the isle. No vestige remained of the rosy light; and the sky was filled with returning stars. And looking oceanward as I climbed the hill, I saw a lantern that burned on the *Black Falcon* in the harbor, and discerned the embers of our

fire that smoldered on the sands. Then, praying with a fearful fervor, I waited for dawn.

The Abominations of Yondo



THE SAND OF the desert of Yondo is not as the sand of other deserts; for Yondo lies nearest of all to the world's rim; and strange winds, blowing from a pit no astronomer may hope to fathom, have sown its ruinous fields with the gray dust of corroding planets, the black ashes of extinguished suns. The dark, orblike mountains which rise from its wrinkled and pitted plain are not all its own, for some are fallen asteroids half-buried in that abysmal sand. Things have crept in from nether space, whose incursion is forbid by the gods of all proper and well-ordered lands; but there are no such gods in Yondo, where live the hoary genii of stars abolished and decrepit demons left homeless by the destruction of antiquated hells.

It was noon of a vernal day when I came forth from that interminable cactus-forest in which the Inquisitors of Ong had left me, and saw at my feet the gray beginnings of Yondo. I repeat, it was noon of a vernal day; but in that fantastic wood I had found no token or memory of a spring; and the swollen, fulvous, dying and half-rotten growths through which I had pushed my way, were like no other cacti, but bore shapes of abomination scarcely to be described. The very air was heavy with stagnant odors of decay; and leprous lichens mottled the black soil and russet vegetation with increasing frequency. Pale-green vipers lifted their heads from prostrate cactus-boles and watched me with eyes of bright ochre that had no lids or pupils. These things had disquieted me for hours past; and I did not like the monstrous fungi, with hueless stems and nodding heads of poisonous mauve, which grew from the sodden lips of fetid tarns; and the sinister ripples spreading and fading on the yellow water at my approach were not reassuring to one

whose nerves were still taut from unmentionable tortures. Then, when even the blotched and sickly cacti became more sparse and stunted, and rills of ashen sand crept in among them, I began to suspect how great was the hatred my heresy had aroused in the priests of Ong and to guess the ultimate malignancy of their vengeance.

I will not detail the indiscretions which had led me, a careless stranger from far-off lands, into the power of those dreadful magicians and mysteriarchs who serve the lion-headed Ong. These indiscretions, and the particulars of my arrest, are painful to remember; and least of all do I like to remember the racks of dragon-gut strewn with powdered adamant, on which men are stretched naked; or that unlit room with six-inch windows near the sill, where bloated corpse worms crawled in by hundreds from a neighboring catacomb. Sufficient to say that, after expending the resources of their frightful fantasy, my inquisitors had borne me blindfolded on camel-back for incomputable hours, to leave me at morning twilight in that sinister forest. I was free, they told me, to go whither I would; and in token of the clemency of Ong, they gave me a loaf of coarse bread and a leathern bottle of rank water by way of provision. It was at noon of the same day that I came to the desert of Yondo.

So far, I had not thought of turning back, for all the horror of those rotting cacti, or the evil things that dwelt among them. Now, I paused knowing the abominable legend of the land to which I had come; for Yondo is a place where few have ventured wittingly and of their own accord. Fewer still have returned — babbling of unknown horrors and strange treasure; and the life-long palsy which shakes their withered limbs, together with the mad gleam in their starting eyes beneath whitened brows and lashes, is not an incentive for others to follow. So it was that I hesitated on the verge of those ashen sands, and felt the tremor of a new fear in my

wrenched vitals. It was dreadful to go on, and dreadful to go back, for I felt sure that the priests had made provision against the latter contingency. So after a little I went forward, singing at each step in loathly softness, and followed by certain long-legged insects that I had met among the cacti. These insects were the color of a week-old corpse and were as large as tarantulas; but when I turned and trod upon the foremost, a mephitic stench arose that was more nauseous even than their color. So, for the nonce, I ignored them as much as possible.

Indeed, such things were minor horrors in my predicament. Before me, under a huge sun of sickly scarlet, Yondo reached interminable as the land of a hashish-dream against the black heavens. Far-off, on the utmost rim, were those orb-like mountains of which I have told; but in between were awful blanks of gray desolation, and low, treeless hills like the backs of half-buried monsters. Struggling on, I saw great pits where meteors had sunk from sight; and divers-colored jewels that I could not name glared or glistened from the dust. There were fallen cypresses that rotted by crumbling mausoleums, on whose lichen blotted marble fat chameleons crept with royal pearls in their mouths. Hidden by the low ridges, were cities of which no stela remained unbroken — immense and immemorial cities lapsing shard by shard, atom by atom, to feed infinities of desolation. I dragged my torture-weakened limbs over vast rubbish-heaps that had once been mighty temples; and fallen gods frowned in rotting pasammite or leered in riven porphyry at my feet. Over all was an evil silence, broken only by the satanic laughter of hyenas, and the rustling of adders in thickets of dead thorn or antique gardens given to the perishing nettle and fumitory.

Topping one of the many mound-like ridges, I saw the waters of a weird lake, unfathomably dark and green as malachite, and set with bars of profulgent salt. These waters lay far beneath me in a cup-like hollow; but

almost at my feet on the wave-worn slopes were heaps of that ancient salt; and I knew that the lake was only the bitter and ebbing dregs of some former sea. Climbing down, I came to the dark waters, and began to lave my hands; but there was a sharp and corrosive sting in that immemorial brine, and I desisted quickly preferring the desert dust that had wrapped me about like a slow shroud. Here I decided to rest for a little; and hunger forced me to consume part of the meager and mocking fare with which I had been provided by the priests. It was my intention to push on if my strength would allow and reach the lands that lie to the north of Yondo. These lands are desolate, indeed, but their desolation is of a more usual than that of Yondo; and certain tribes of nomads have been known to visit them occasionally. If fortune favored me, I might fall in with one of these tribes.

The scant fare revived me, and, for the first time in weeks of which I had lost all reckoning, I heard the whisper of a faint hope. The corpse-colored insects had long since ceased to follow me; and so far despite the eeriness of the sepulchral silence and the mounded dust of timeless ruin, I had met nothing half so horrible as those insects. I began to think that the terrors of Yondo were somewhat exaggerated. It was then that I heard a diabolic chuckle on the hillside above me. The sound began with a sharp abruptness that startled me beyond all reason, and continued endlessly, never varying its single note, like the mirth of an idiotic demon. I turned, and saw the mouth of a dark cave fanged with green stalactites, which I had not perceived before. The sound appeared to come from within this cave.

With a fearful intentness I stared at the black opening. The chuckle grew louder, but for awhile I could see nothing. At last I caught a whitish glimmer in the darkness; then, with all the rapidity of nightmare, a monstrous Thing emerged. It had a pale, hairless, egg-shaped body, large as that of a gravid she-goat; and this body was mounted on nine long wavering

legs with many flanges, like the legs of some enormous spider. The creature ran past me to the water's edge; and I saw that there were no eyes in its oddly sloping face; but two knife-like ears rose high above its head, and a thin, wrinkled snout hung down across its mouth, whose flabby lips, parted in that eternal chuckle, revealed rows of bats' teeth. It drank acidly of the bitter lake then, with thirst satisfied, it turned and seemed to sense my presence, for the wrinkled snout rose and pointed toward me, sniffing audibly. Whether the creature would have fled, or whether it meant to attack me, I do not know; for I could bear the sight no longer but ran with trembling limbs amid the massive boulders and great bars of salt along the lakeshore.

Utterly breathless I stopped at last, and saw that I was not pursued, I sat down, still trembling, in the shadow of a boulder. But I was to find little respite, for now began the second of those bizarre adventures which forced me to believe all the mad legends I had heard. More startling even than that diabolic chuckle was the scream that rose at my very elbow from the salt-compounded sand — the scream of a woman possessed by some atrocious agony, or helpless in the grip of devils. Turning, I beheld a veritable Venus, naked in a white perfection that could fear no scrutiny, but immersed to her navel in the sand. Her terror-widened eyes implored me and her lotus hands reached out with beseeching gesture. I sprang to her side — and touched a marble statue, whose carven lids were drooped in some enigmatic dream of dead cycles, and whose hands were buried with the lost loveliness of hips and thighs. Again I fled, shaken with a new fear; and again I heard the scream of a woman's agony. But this time I did not turn to see the imploring eyes and hands.

Up the long slope to the north of that accursed lake stumbling over boulders of basanite and ledges that were sharp with verdigris-covered

metals; floundering in pits of salt, on terraces wrought by the receding tide in ancient aeons. I fled as a man flies from dream to baleful dream of some cacodemoniacal night. At whiles there was a cold whisper in my ear, which did not come from the wind of my flight; and looking back as I reached one of the upper terraces, I perceived a singular shadow that ran pace by pace with my own. This shadow was not the shadow of man nor ape nor any known beast; the head was too grotesquely elongated, the squat body too gibbous ; and I was unable to determine whether the shadow possessed five legs, or whether what appeared to be the fifth was merely a tail.

Terror lent me new strength, and I had reached the hilltop when I dared to look back again. But still the fantastic shadow kept pace by pace with mine; and now I caught a curious and utterly sickening odor, foul as the odor of bats who have hung in a charnel-house amid the mold of corruption. I ran for leagues, while the red sun slanted above the asteroidal mountains to the west; and the weird shadow lengthened with mine but kept always at the same distance behind me.

An hour before sunset I came to a circle of small pillars that rose miraculously unbroken amid ruins that were like a vast pile of potsherds. As I passed among these pillars I heard a whimper, like the whimper of some fierce animal, between rage and fear, and saw that the shadow had not followed me within the circle. I stopped and waited, conjecturing at once that I had found a sanctuary my unwelcome familiar would not dare to enter; and in this the action of the shadow confirmed me, the Thing hesitated, then ran about the circle of columns pausing often between them; and, whimpering all the while, at last went away and disappeared in the desert toward the setting sun.

For a full half hour I did not dare to move; then, the imminence of night, with all its probabilities of fresh terror, urged me to push on as far as I could

to the north. For I was now in the very heart of Yondo where demons or phantoms might dwell who would not respect the sanctuary of the unbroken columns. Now, as I toiled on, the sunlight altered strangely; for the red orb nearing the mounded horizon, sank and smouldered in a belt of miasmal haze, where floating dust from all the shattered fanes and necropoli of Yondo was mixed with evil vapors coiling skyward from black enormous gulfs lying beyond the utmost rim of the world. In that light, the entire waste, the rounded mountains, the serpentine hills, the lost cities, were drenched with phantasmal and darkening scarlet.

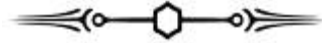
Then, out of the north, where shadows mustered, there came a curious figure of a tall man fully caparisoned in chain-mail — or, rather, what I assumed to be a man. As the figure approached me, clanking dismally at each step on the sharded ground, I saw that its armor was of brass mottled with verdigris; and a casque of the same metal furnished with coiling horns and a serrate comb, rose high above its head. I say its head, for the sunset was darkening, and I could not see clearly at any distance; but when the apparition came abreast, I perceived that there was no face beneath the brows of the bizarre helmet whose empty edges were outlined for a moment against the smouldering light. Then the figure passed on, still clanking dismally and vanished.

But on its heels ere the sunset faded, there came a second apparition, striding with incredible strides and halting when it loomed almost upon me in the red twilight — the monstrous mummy of some ancient king still crowned with untarnished gold but turning to my gaze a visage that more than time or the worm had wasted. Broken swathings flapped about the skeleton legs, and above the crown that was set with sapphires and orange rubies, a black something swayed and nodded horribly; but, for an instant, I did not dream what it was. Then, in its middle, two oblique and scarlet eyes

opened and glowed like hellish coals, and two ophidian fangs glittered in an ape-like mouth. A squat, furless, shapeless head on a neck of disproportionate extent leaned unspeakably down and whispered in the mummy's ear. Then, with one stride, the titanic lich took half the distance between us, and from out the folds of the tattered sere-cloth a gaunt arm arose, and fleshless, taloned fingers laden with glowering gems, reached out and fumbled for my throat...

Back, back through aeons of madness and dread, in a prone, precipitate flight I ran from those fumbling fingers that hung always on the dusk behind me, back, back forever, unthinking, unhesitating, to all the abominations I had left; back in the thickening twilight toward the nameless and sharded ruins, the haunted lake, the forest of evil cacti, and the cruel and cynical inquisitors of Ong who waited my return.

The White Sybil



TORTHA, THE POET, with strange austral songs in his heart, and the umber of high and heavy suns on his face, had come back to his native city of Cerngoth, in Mhu Thulan, by the Hyperborean sea. Far had he wandered in the quest of that alien beauty which had fled always before him like the horizon. Beyond Commorion of the white, numberless spires, and beyond the marsh-grown jungles to the south of Cornmorion, he had floated on nameless rivers, and had crossed the half-legendary realm of Tscho Vulpanomi, upon whose diamond-sanded, ruby-graveled shore an ignescent ocean was said to beat forever with fiery spume.

He had beheld many marvels, and things incredible to relate: the uncouthly carved gods of the South, to whom blood was spilt on sun-approaching towers; the plumes of the *huusim*, which were many yards in length and were colored like pure flame; the mailed monsters of the austral swamps; the proud argosies of Mu and Antillia, which moved by enchantment, without oar or sail; the fuming peaks that were shaken perpetually by the struggles of imprisoned demons. But, walking at noon on the streets of Cerngoth, he met a stranger marvel than these. Idly, with no expectation of other than homely things, he beheld the White Sybil of Polarion.

He knew not whence she had come, but suddenly she was before him in the throng. Amid the tawny girls of Cerngoth with their russet hair and blue-black eyes, she was like an apparition descended from the moon. Goddess, ghost or woman, he knew not which, she passed fleetly and was gone: a

creature of snow and norland light, with eyes like moon-pervaded pools, and lips that were smitten with the same pallor as the brow and bosom. Her gown was of some filmy white fabric, pure and ethereal as her person.

In wonder that turned to startled rapture, Tortha gazed at the miraculous being, and sustained for a moment the strangely thrilling light of her chill eyes, in which he seemed to find an obscure recognition, such as a long-veiled divinity, appearing at last, would vouchsafe to her worshipper.

Somehow, she seemed to bring with her the infrangible solitude of remote places, the death-deep hush of lonely plateaus and mountains. A silence, such as might dwell in some abandoned city, fell on the chaffering, chattering crowd as she went by; and the people drew back from her in sudden awe. Before the silence could break into gossiping murmurs, Tortha had guessed her identity.

He knew that he had seen the White Sybil, that mysterious being who was rumored to come and go as if by some preterhuman agency in the cities of Hyperborea. No man had ever learned her name, or her nativity; but she was said to descend like a spirit from the bleak mountains to the north of Cerngoth; from the desert land of Polarion, where the oncoming glaciers crept in valleys that had once been fertile with fern and cycad, and passes that had been the highways of busy traffic.

No one had ever dared to accost or follow her. Often she came and went in silence; but sometimes, in the marts or public squares, she would utter cryptic prophecies and tidings of doom. In many places, throughout Mhu Thulan and central Hyperborea, she had foretold the enormous sheet of ice, now crawling gradually downward from the pole, that would cover the continent in ages to come, and would bury beneath oblivious drift the mammoth palms of its jungles and the superb pinnacles of its cities. And in great Commorion, then the capital, she had prophesied a stranger doom

that was to befall this city long before the encroachment of the ice. Men feared her everywhere, as a messenger of unknown outland gods, moving abroad in supernal bale and beauty.

All this, Tortha had heard many times; and he had wondered somewhat at the tale, but had soon dismissed it from his mind, being laden with marvelous memories of exotic things. But now that he had seen the Sybil, it was as if an unexpected revelation had been offered to him; as if he had discerned, briefly and afar, the hidden goal of a mystic pilgrimage.

In that single glimpse, he had found the personification of all the vague ideals and unfixed longings that had drawn him from land to land. Here was the eluding strangeness he had sought on alien breasts and waters, and beyond horizons of fire-vomiting mountains. Here was the veiled Star, whose name and luster he had never known. The moon-cold eyes of the Sybil had kindled a strange love in Tortha, to whom love had been, at most, no more than a passing agitation of the senses.

However, on that occasion, it did not occur to him that he might follow the visitant or come to learn more concerning her. Momentarily, he was content with the rare vision that had fired his soul and dazzled his senses. Dreaming such dreams as the moon might inspire in a moth; dreams through which the Sybil moved like a woman-shaped flame on ways too far and too steep for human feet, he returned to his house in Cerngoth.

The days that ensued were dim and dream-like to Tortha, and were presided over by his memory of the white apparition. A mad Uranian fever mounted in his soul, together with the sure knowledge that he sought an impossible fruition. Idly, to beguile the hours, he copied the poems he had written during his journey, or turned over the pages of boyish manuscripts. All were equally void and without meaning now, like the sere leaves of a bygone year.

With no prompting on the part of Tortha, his servants and visitors spoke to him of the Sybil. Seldom, they said, had she entered Cerngoth, appearing more often in cities remote from the ice-bound waste of Polarion. Truly, she was no mortal being, for she had been seen on the same day in places hundreds of miles apart. Huntsmen had sometimes met her on the mountains above Cerngoth; but always, when encountered thus, she had disappeared quickly, like a morning vapor that melts among the crags.

The poet, listening with a moody and absent mien, spoke of his love to no one. He knew well that his kinsfolk and acquaintances would think this passion a more errant madness than the youthful yearning that had led him to unheard-of lands. No human lover had aspired to the Sybil, whose beauty was a perilous brightness, akin to meteor and fireball; a fatal and lethal beauty, born of transarctic gulfs, and somehow one with the far doom of worlds.

Like the brand of frost or flame, her memory burned in Tortha. Musing among his neglected books, or walking abroad in reverie on which no outward thing could intrude, he saw always before him the pale radiance of the Sybil. He seemed to hear a whisper from boreal solitudes: a murmur of ethereal sweetness, sharp as ice-born air, vocal with high, unearthly words, that sang of inviolate horizons and the chill glory of lunar auroras above continents impregnable to man.

The long summer days went by, bringing the outland folk to trade their furs and eider in Cerngoth, and damaskeening the slopes beyond the city with flowers of bright azure and vermilion. But the Sybil was not seen again in Cerngoth, nor was she heard of in other cities. It seemed as if her visitations had ceased; as if, having delivered the tidings committed to her by the outer gods, she would appear no more in the haunts of mankind.

Amid the despair that was twin to his passion, Tortha had nurtured a hope that he might again behold the visitant. Slowly the hope grew fainter; but left his longing undiminished. In his daily walks he now went farther afield, leaving the houses and streets and turning toward the mountains that glowered above Cerngoth, guarding with icy horns the glacier-taken plateau of Polarion.

Higher he went each day on the hills, lifting his eyes to the dark crags from which the Sybil was rumored to descend. An obscure message seemed to call him on; and still, for a time, he did not dare to obey the summons wholly, but turned back to Cerngoth.

There came the forenoon when he climbed to a hill-meadow from which the roofs of the city were like littered shells beside a sea whose tumbling billows had become a smooth floor of turquoise. He was alone in a world of flowers: the frail mantle that summer had flung before the desolate peaks. The turf rolled away from him on every hand in broad scrolls and carpetries of flaming color. Even the wild briars had put forth their fragile, sanguine-tinted blossoms; and the very banks and precipices were heavily arrased with low-hanging bloom.

Tortha had met no one; for he had long since left the trail by which the squat mountain people came to the city. A vague prompting, which seemed to include a promise unspoken by any voice, had led him to this lofty meadow from which a crystal rill ran seaward amid the bright cascades of flowers.

Pale, diaphanous beneath the sun, a few cirrous clouds went floating idly toward the pinnacles; and the quarrying hawks flew oceanward on broad red wings. A perfume, rich as temple-incense, rose from the blossoms whereon he had trampled; the light lay still and heavy upon him, dazzling

his senses; and Tortha, a little weary from his climbing, grew faint for a moment with some strange vertigo.

Recovering, he saw before him the White Sybil, who stood amid the flowers of blood-red and cerulean like a goddess of the snow attired in veils of moon-flame. Her pale eyes, pouring an icy rapture into his veins, regarded him enigmatically. With a gesture of her hand that was like the glimmering of light on inaccessible places, she beckoned him to follow, as she turned and went upward along the slope above the meadow.

Tortha had forgotten his fatigue; had forgotten all but the celestial beauty of the Sybil. He did not question the enchantment that claimed him, the wild Uranian ecstasy that rose in his heart. He knew only that she had reappeared to him, had beckoned him; and he followed.

Soon the hills grew steeper against the overtowering crags; and barren ribs of rock emerged gloomily through the mantling flowerage. Without effort, light as a drifting vapor, the Sybil climbed on before Tortha. He could not approach her; and though the interval of distance between then increased at times, he did not altogether lose sight of her luminous figure.

Now he was among bleak ravines and savage scarps, where the Sybil was like a swimming star in the chasmal, crag-flung shadows. The fierce mountain eagles screamed above him, eyeing his progress as they flew about their eyries. The chill trickle of rills born of the eternal glaciers fell upon him from overbeetling ledges; and sudden chasms yawned before his feet with a hollow roaring of vertiginous waters far below.

Tortha was conscious only of an emotion such as impels the moth to pursue a wandering flame. He did not picture to himself the aim and end of his pursuit, nor the fruition of the weird love that drew him on. Oblivious of mortal fatigue, of peril and disaster that might lie before him, he felt the delirium of a mad ascent to superhuman heights.

Above the wild ravines and escarpments, he came to a lofty pass that had led formerly between Mhu Thulan and Polarion. Here an olden highway, creviced and chasmed, and partly blocked with debris of avalanches and fallen watchtowers, ran between walls of winter-eaten rock. Down the pass, like some enormous dragon of glittering ice, there poured the vanguard of the boreal glaciers to meet the Sybil and Tortha.

Amid the strange ardor of his ascent, the poet was aware of a sudden chill that had touched the noontide. The rays of the sun had grown dull and heatless; the shadows were like the depth of ice-hewn Arctic tombs. A film of ochreous cloud, moving with magical swiftness, swept athwart the day and darkened like a dusty web, till the sun glowed through it lifeless and pale as a moon in December. The heavens above and beyond the pass were closed in with curtains of leaden-threaded grey.

Into the gathering dimness, over the glacier's machicolated ice, the Sybil sped like a flying fire, paler and more luminous against the somber cloud.

Now Tortha had climbed the fretted incline of the ice that crawled out from Polarion. He had gained the summit of the pass and would soon reach the open plateau beyond. But like a storm raised up by preterhuman sorcery, the snow was upon him now in spectral swirls and blinding flurries. It came as with the ceaseless flight of soft wide wings, the measureless coiling of vague and pallid dragons.

For a time he still discerned the Sybil, as one sees the dim glowing of a sacred lamp through altar-curtains that descend in some great temple. Then the snow thickened, till he no longer saw the guiding gleam, and knew not if he still wandered through the walled pass, or was lost upon some bournless plain of perpetual winter.

He fought for breath in the storm-stifled air. The clear white fire that had sustained him seemed to sink and fall in his icy limbs. The unearthly fervor

and exaltation died away, leaving a dark fatigue, an ever-spreading numbness that rose through all his being. The bright image of the Sybil was no more than a nameless star that fell with all else he had ever known or dreamed into grey forgetfulness...

Tortha opened his eyes to a strange world. Whether he had fallen and had died in the storm, or had stumbled on somehow through its white oblivion, he could not guess: but around him now there was no trace of the driving snow or the glacier-shackled mountains.

He stood in a valley that might have been the inmost heart of some boreal paradise — a valley that was surely no part of waste Polarion. About him the turf was piled with flowers that had the frail and pallid hues of a lunar rainbow. Their delicate forms were those of the blossoms of snow and frost, and it seemed that they would melt and vanish at a touch.

The sky above the valley was not the low-arching, tender turquoise heaven of Mhu Thulan, but was vague, dreamlike, remote, and full of an infinite violescence, like the welkin of a world beyond time and space. Everywhere there was light; but Tortha saw no sun in the cloudless vault. It was as if the sun, the moon, the stars, had been molten together ages ago and had dissolved into some ultimate, eternal luminescence.

Tall, slender trees, whose leafage of lunar green was thickly starred with blossoms delicate as those of the turf, grew in groves and clumps above the valley, and lined the margin of a stilly flowing stream that wound away into measureless misty perspectives.

Tortha noticed that he cast no shadow on the flowered ground. The trees likewise were shadowless, and were not reflected in the clear still waters. No wind lifted the blossom-heavy boughs, or stirred the countless petals amid the grass. A cryptic silence brooded over all things, like the hush of some supernal doom.

Filled with a high wonder, but powerless to surmise the riddle of his situation, the poet turned as if at the bidding of an imperatory voice. Behind him, and near at hand, there was an arbor of flowering vines that had draped themselves from tree to tree. Through the half-parted arras of bloom, in the bower's heart, he saw like a drifted snow the white veils of the Sybil.

With timid steps, with eyes that faltered before her mystic beauty, and a flaming as of blown torches in his heart, he entered the arbor. From the bank of blossoms on which she reclined, the Sybil rose to receive her worshipper...

Of all that followed, much was forgotten afterwards by Tortha. It was like a light too radiant to be endured, a thought that eluded conception through surpassing strangeness. It was real beyond all that men deem reality: and yet it seemed to Tortha that he, the Sybil, and all that surrounded them, were part of an after-mirage on the deserts of time; that he was poised insecurely above life and death in some bright, fragile bower of dreams.

He thought that the Sybil greeted him in thrilling, mellifluous words of a tongue that he knew well, but had never heard. Her tones filled him with an ecstasy near to pain. He sat beside her on the faery bank, and she told him many things: divine, stupendous, perilous things; dire as the secret of life; sweet as the lore of oblivion; strange and immemorable as the lost knowledge of sleep. But she did not tell him her name, nor the secret of her essence; and still he knew not if she were ghost or woman, goddess or spirit.

Something there was in her speech of time and its mystery; something of that which lies forever beyond time; something of the grey shadow of doom that waits upon world and sun; something of love, that pursues an elusive,

perishing fire; of death, the soil from which all flowers spring; of life, that is a mirage on the frozen void.

For a while Tortha was content merely to listen. A high rapture filled him, he felt the awe of a mortal in the presence of a deity. Then, as he grew accustomed to his situation, the woman-like beauty of the Sybil spoke to him no less eloquently than her words. Vacillant, by degrees, like a tide that lifts to some unearthly moon, there rose up in his heart the human love that was half of his adoration. He felt a delirium of desire, mixed with the vertigo of one who has climbed to an impossible height. He saw only the white loveliness of her divinity; and no longer did he hear clearly the high wisdom of her speech.

The Sybil paused in her ineffable discourse; and somehow, with slow, stumbling words, he dared to tell her of his love.

She made no answer, gave no gesture of assent or denial. But when he had done, she regarded him strangely; whether with love or pity, sadness or joy, he could not tell. Then, swiftly, she bent forward and kissed his brow with her pallid lips. Their kiss was like the searing of fire or ice. But, mad with his supreme longing, Tortha strove rashly to embrace the Sybil.

Dreadfully, unutterably, she seemed to change in his arms as he clasped her — to become a frozen corpse that had lain for ages in a floe-built tomb — a leper-white mummy in whose frosted eyes he read the horror of the ultimate void. Then she was a thing that had no form or name — a dark corruption that flowed and eddied in his arms — a hueless dust, a flight of gleaming atoms, that rose between his evaded fingers. Then there was nothing — and the faery-tinted flowers about him were changing also, were crumbling swiftly, were falling beneath flurries of white snow. The vast and violet heaven, the tall slim trees, the magic, unreflecting stream — the very ground under him — all had vanished amid the universal, whirling flakes.

It seemed to Tortha that he was plunging dizzily into some deep gulf together with that chaos of driven snows. Gradually, as he fell, the air grew clear about him, and he appeared to hang suspended above the receding, dissolving storm. He was alone in a still, funereal, starless heaven; and below, at an awesome and giddy distance, he saw the dimly glittering reaches of a land sheathed with glacial ice from horizon to far-curved horizon. The snows had vanished from the dead air; and a searing cold, like the breath of the infinite ether, was about Tortha.

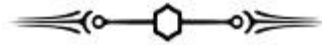
All this he saw and felt for a timeless instant. Then, with the swiftness of a meteor, he resumed his fall toward the frozen continent. And like the rushing flame of a meteor, his consciousness dimmed and went out on the bleak air even as he fell.

Tortha had been seen by the half-savage people of the mountains as he disappeared in the sudden storm that had come mysteriously from Polarion. Later, when the blinding flurries had died down, they found him lying on the glacier. They tended him with rough care and uncouth skill, marvelling much at the white mark that had been imprinted like a fiery brand on his sun-swart brow. The flesh was seared deeply; and the mark was shaped like the pressure of lips. But they could not know that the never-fading mark had been left by the kiss of the White Sybil. Slowly, Tortha won back to some measure of his former strength. But ever afterward there was a cloudy dimness in his mind, a blur of unresolving shadow, like the dazzlement in eyes that have looked on some insupportable light.

Among those who tended him was a pale maiden, not uncomely; and Tortha took her for the Sybil in the darkness that had come upon him. The maiden's name was Illara, and Tortha loved her in his delusion; and, forgetful of his kin and his friends in Cerngoth, he dwelt with the mountain people thereafter, taking Illara to wife and making the songs of the little

tribe. For the most part, he was happy in his belief that the Sybil had returned to him; and Illara, in her way, was content, being not the first of mortal women whose lover had remained faithful to a divine illusion.

The Ice-Demon



QUANGA THE HUNTSMAN, with Hoom Feethos and Eibur Tsanth, two of the most enterprising jewelers of Iqqua, had crossed the borders of a region into which men went but seldom — and wherefrom they returned even more rarely. Travelling north from Iqqua, they had passed into desolate Mhu Thulan, where the great glacier of Polarion had rolled like a frozen sea upon wealthy and far-famed cities, covering the broad isthmus from shore to shore beneath fathoms of perpetual ice.

The shell-shaped domes of Cerngoth, it was fabled, could still be seen deep down in the glaciation; and the high, keen spires of Oggon-Zhai were embedded therein, together with fern-palm and mammoth and the square black temples of the god Tsathoggua. All this had occurred many centuries ago; and still the ice, a mighty, glittering rampart, was moving south upon deserted lands.

Now, in the path of the embattled glacier, Quanga led his companions on a bold quest. Their object was nothing less than the retrieval of the rubies of King Haalor, who, with the wizard Ommum-Vog and many full-caparisoned soldiers, had gone out five decades before to make war upon the polar ice. From this fantastic expedition, neither Haalor nor Ommum-Vog had come back; and the sorry, ragged remnant of their men-at-arms, returning to Iqqua, after two moons, had told a dire tale.

The army, they said, had made its encampment on a sort of knoll, carefully chosen by Ommum-Vog, in full sight of the vanward ice. Then the mighty sorcerer, standing with Haalor amid a ring of braziers that fumed

incessantly with golden smoke, and reciting runes that were older than the world, had conjured up a fiery orb, vaster and redder than the southward-circling sun of heaven. And the orb, with blazing beams that smote from the zenith, torrid and effulgent, had caused the sun to seem no more than a daylight moon, and the soldiers had almost swooned from its heat in their heavy panoply. But beneath its beams the verges of the glacier melted and ran in swift rills and rivers, so that Haalor for a time was hopeful of reconquering the realm of Mhu Thulan over which his forefathers had ruled in bygone ages.

The rushing waters had deepened, flowing past the knoll on which the army waited. Then, as if by a hostile magic, the rivers began to give forth a pale and stifling mist, that blinded the conjured sun of Ommum-Vog, so that its sultry beams grew faint and chill and had power no longer on the ice.

Vainly the wizard had put forth other spells, trying to dissipate the deep and gelid fog. But the vapor drew down, evil and clammy, coiling and wreathing like knots of phantom serpents, and filling men's marrows as if with the cold of death. It covered all the camp, a tangible thing, ever colder and thicker, numbing the limbs of those who groped blindly and could not see the faces of their fellows at arm's-length. A few of the common soldiers, somehow, reached its outer confines and crept fearfully away beneath the wan sun, seeing no longer in the skies the wizard globe that had been called up by Ommum-Vog. And looking back presently, as they fled in strange terror, they beheld, instead of the low-lying mist they had thought to see, a newly frozen sheet of ice that covered the mound on which the king and the sorcerer had made their encampment. The ice rose higher above the ground than a tall man's head; and dimly, in its glittering depth, the fleeing soldiers saw the imprisoned forms of their leaders and companions.

Deeming that this thing was no natural occurrence, but a sorcery that had been exerted by the great glacier, and that the glacier itself was a live, malignant entity with powers of unknown bale, they did not slacken their flight. And the ice had suffered them to depart in peace, as if to give warning of the fate of those who dared to assail it.

Some there were who believed the tale, and some who doubted. But the kings that ruled in Iqqua after Haalor went not forth to do battle with the ice; and no wizard rose to make war upon it with conjured suns. Men fled before the ever-advancing glaciations; and strange legends were told of how people had been overtaken or cut off in lonely valleys by sudden, diabolic shiftings of the ice, as if it had stretched out a living hand. And legends there were, of awful crevasses that yawned abruptly and closed like monstrous mouths upon them that dared the frozen waste; of winds like the breath of boreal demons, that blasted men's flesh with instant, utter cold and turned them into statues hard as granite. In time the whole region, for many miles before the glacier, was generally shunned; and only the hardest hunters would follow their quarry into that winter-blighted land.

Now it happened that the fearless huntsman Iluac, the elder brother of Quanga, had gone into Mhu Thulan, and had pursued an enormous black fox that led him afar on the mighty fields of the ice-sheet. For many leagues he trailed it, coming never within bowshot of the beast; and at length he came to a great mound on the plain, that seemed to mark the position of a buried hill. And Iluac thought that the fox entered a cavern in the mound; so, with lifted bow and a poised arrow at the string, he went after it into the cavern.

The place was like a chamber of boreal kings or gods. All about him, in a dim green light, were huge, glimmering pillars; and giant icicles hung from the roof in the form of stalactites. The floor sloped downward; and Iluac

came to the cave's end without finding any trace of the fox. But in the transparent depth of the further wall, at the bottom, he saw the standing shapes of many men, deep-frozen and sealed up as in a tomb, with undecaying bodies and fair, unshrunk features. The men were armed with tall spears, and most of them wore the panoply of soldiers. But among them, in the van, there stood a haughty figure attired in the sea-blue robes of a king; and beside him was a bowed ancient who wore the night-black garb of a sorcerer. The robes of the regal figure were heavily sewn with gems that burned like colored stars through the ice; and great rubies red as gouts of newly congealing blood were arranged in the lines of a triangle on the bosom, forming the royal sign of the kings of Iqqua. So Iluac knew, by these tokens, that he had found the tomb of Haalor and Ommum-Vog and the soldiers with whom they had gone up against the ice in former days.

Overawed by the strangeness of it all, and remembering now the old legends, Iluac lost his courage for the first time, and quitted the chamber without delay. Nowhere could he find the black fox; and abandoning the chase, he returned southward, reaching the lands below the glacier without mishap. But he swore later that the ice had changed in a weird manner while he was following the fox, so that he was unsure of his direction for a while after leaving the cavern. There were steep ridges and hummocks where none had been before, making his return a toilsome journey; and the glaciation seemed to extend itself for many miles beyond its former limits. And because of these things, which he could not explain or understand, a curious eery fear was born in the heart of Iluac.

Never again did he go back upon the glacier; but he told his brother Quanga of that which he had found, and described the location of the cavern-chamber in which King Haalor and Ommum-Vog and their men-at-

arms were entombed. And soon after this, Iluac was killed by a white bear on which he had used all his arrows in vain.

Quanga was no less brave than Iluac; and he did not fear the glacier, since he had been upon it many times and had noticed nothing untoward. His was a heart that lusted after gain, and often he thought of the rubies of Haalor, locked with the king in eternal ice; and it seemed to him that a bold man might recover the rubies.

So, one summer, while trading in Iqqua with his furs, he went to the jewelers Eibur Tسانth and Hoom Feethos, taking with him a few garnets that he had found in a northern valley. While the jewelers were appraising the garnets, he spoke idly of the rubies of Haalor, and inquired craftily as to their value. Then, hearing the great worth of the gems, and noting the greedy interest that was shown by Hoom Feethos and Eibur Tسانth, he told them the tale he had heard from his brother Iluac, and offered, if they would promise him half the value of the rubies, to guide them to the hidden cave.

The jewelers agreed to this proposition, in spite of the hardships of the proposed journey, and the difficulty they might afterward encounter in disposing surreptitiously of gems that belonged to the royal family of Iqqua and would be claimed by the present king, Ralour, if their discovery were learned. The fabulous worth of the rubies had fired their avarice. Quanga, on his part, desired the complicity and connivance of the dealers, knowing that it would be hard for him to sell the jewels otherwise. He did not trust Hoom Feethos and Eibur Tسانth, and it was for this reason that he required them to go with him to the cavern and pay over to him the agreed sum of money as soon as they were in possession of the treasure.

The strange trio had set forth in midsummer. Now, after two weeks of journeying through a wild, sub-arctic region, they were approaching the confines of the eternal ice. They travelled on foot, and their supplies were

carried by three horses little larger than musk-oxen. Quanga, an unerring marksman, hunted for their daily food the hares and waterfowl of the country.

Behind them, in a cloudless turquoise heaven, there burned the low sun that was said to have described a loftier ecliptic in former ages. Drifts of unmelting snow were heaped in the shadows of the higher hills; and in steep valleys they came upon the vanward glaciers of the ice-sheet. The trees and shrubs were already sparse and stunted, in a land where rich forests had flourished in olden time beneath a milder climate. But poppies flamed in the meadows and along the slopes, spreading their frail beauty like a scarlet rug before the feet of perennial winter; and the quiet pools and stagnant-flowing streams were lined with white water-lilies.

A little to the east, they saw the fuming of volcanic peaks that still resisted the inroads of the glaciers. On the west were high, gaunt mountains whose sheer cliffs and pinnacles were topped with snow, and around whose nether slopes the ice had climbed like an inundating sea. Before them was the looming, crenelated wall of the realm-wide glaciation, moving equally on plain and hill, uprooting the trees, and pressing the soil forward in vast folds and ridges. Its progress had been stayed a little by the northern summer. Quanga and the jewelers, as they went on, came to turbid rills, made by a temporary melting, that issued from beneath the glittering blue-green ramparts.

They left their pack-horses in a grassy valley, tethered by long cords of elk-thong to the dwarfish willows. Then, carrying such provisions and other equipment as they might require for a two days' journey, they climbed the ice-slope at a point selected by Quanga as being most readily accessible, and started in the direction of the cave that had been found by Iluac. Quanga took his bearings from the position of the volcanic mountains, and

also from two isolated peaks that rose on the sheeted plain to the north like the breasts of a giantess beneath her shining armor.

The three were well equipped for all the exigencies of their search. Quanga carried a curious pick-ax of finely tempered bronze, to be used in disintombing the body of King Haalor; and he was armed with a short, leaf-shaped sword, in addition to his bow and quiver of arrows. His garments were made from the fur of a giant bear, brown-black in color.

Hoom Feethos and Eibur Tsanth, in raiment heavily quilted with eider-down against the cold, followed him complainingly but with avaricious eagerness. They had not enjoyed the long marches through a desolate, bleakening land, nor the rough fare and exposure to the northern elements. Moreover, they had taken a dislike to Quanga, whom they considered rude and overbearing. Their grievances were aggravated by the fact that he was now compelling them to carry most of the supplies in addition to the two heavy bags of gold which they were to exchange later for the gems. Nothing less valuable than the rubies of Haalor would have induced them to come so far, or to set foot on the formidable wastes of the ice-sheet.

The scene before them was like some frozen world of the outer void. Vast, unbroken, save for a few scattered mounds and ridges, the plain extended to the white horizon and its armored peaks. Nothing seemed to live or move on the awful, glistening vistas, whose nearer levels were swept clean of snow. The sun appeared to grow pale and chill, and to recede behind the adventurers; and a wind blew upon them from the ice, like a breath from abysses beyond the pole.

Apart from the boreal desolation and dreariness, however, there was nothing to dismay Quanga or his companions. None of them was superstitious, and they deemed that the old tales were idle myths, were no more than fear-born delusions. Quanga smiled commiseratively at the

thought of his brother Iluac, who had been so oddly frightened and had fancied such extraordinary things after the finding of Haalor. It was a singular weakness in Iluac, the rash and almost foolhardy hunter who had feared neither man nor beast. As to the trapping of Haalor and Ommum-Vog and their army in the glacier, it was plain that they had allowed themselves to be overtaken by the winter storms; and the few survivors, mentally unhinged by their hardships, had told a wild story. Ice — even though it had conquered half of a continent — was merely ice, and its workings conformed invariably to certain natural laws. Iluac had said that the ice-sheet was a great demon, cruel, greedy, and loth to give up that which it had taken. But such beliefs were crude and primitive superstitions, not to be entertained by enlightened minds of the Pleistocene age.

They had climbed the rampart at an early hour of morning. Quanga assured the jewelers that they would reach the cavern by noon at the latest, even if there should be a certain amount of difficulty and delay in locating it.

The plain before them was remarkably free of crevasses, and there was little to obstruct their advance. Steering their way with the two breast-shaped mountains for landmarks before them, they came after three hours to a hill-like elevation that corresponded to the mound of Iluac's story. With little trouble, they found the opening of the deep chamber.

It seemed that the place had changed little if at all since the visit of Iluac, for the interior, with its columns and pendant icicles, conformed closely to his description. The entrance was like a fanged maw. Within, the floor sloped downward at a slippery angle for more than a hundred feet. The chamber swam with a cold and glaucous translucency that filtered through the dome-like roof. At the lower end, in the striated wall, Quanga and the jewelers saw the embedded shapes of a number of men, among which they

distinguished easily the tall, blue-clad corpse of King Haalor and the dark, bowed mummy of Ommum-Vog. Behind these, the shapes of others, lifting their serried spears eternally, and receding downward in stiff ranks through unfathomable depths, were faintly discernible.

Haalor stood regal and erect, with wide-open eyes that stared haughtily as in life. Upon his bosom the triangle of hot and blood-bright rubies smoldered unquenchably in the glacial gloom; and the colder eyes of topazes, of beryls, of diamonds, of chrysolites, gleamed and twinkled from his azure raiment. It seemed that the fabulous gems were separated by no more than a foot or two of ice from the greedy fingers of the hunter and his companions.

Without speaking, they stared raptly at the far-sought treasure. Apart from the great rubies, the jewelers were also estimating the value of the other gems worn by Haalor. These alone, they thought complacently, would have made it worth while to endure the fatigue of the journey and the insolence of Quanga.

The hunter, on his part, was wishing that he had driven an even steeper bargain. The two bags of gold, however, would make him a wealthy man. He could drink to his full content the costly wines, redder than the rubies, that came from far Uzuldaroum in the south. The tawny, slant-eyed girls of Iqqua would dance at his bidding; and he could gamble for high stakes.

All three were unmindful of the eeriness of their situation, alone in that boreal solitude with the frozen dead; and they were oblivious likewise to the ghoulish nature of the robbery they were about to commit. Without waiting to be urged by his companions, Quanga raised the keen and highly tempered pick of bronze, and began to assail the translucent wall with mighty blows.

The ice rang shrilly beneath the pick, and dropped away in crystal splinters and diamond lumps. In a few minutes, he had made a large cavity;

and only a thin shell, cracked and shattering, remained before the body of Haalor. This shell Quanga proceeded to pry off with great care; and soon the triangle of monstrous rubies, more or less encrusted still with clinging ice, lay bare to his fingers. While the proud, bleak eyes of Haalor stared immovably upon him from behind their glassy mask, the hunter dropped the pick, and drawing his sharp, leaf-shaped sword from its scabbard, he began to sever the fine silver wires by which the rubies were attached cunningly to the king's raiment. In his haste he ripped away portions of the sea-blue fabric, baring the frozen and dead-white flesh beneath. One by one, as he removed the rubies, he gave them to Hoom Feethos, standing close behind him; and the dealer, bright-eyed with avarice, drooling a little with ecstasy, stored them carefully in a huge pouch of mottled lizardskin that he had brought along for the purpose.

The last ruby had been secured, and Quanga was about to turn his attention to the lesser jewels that adorned the king's garments in curious patterns and signs of astrological or hieratic significance. Then, amid their preoccupation, he and Hoom Feethos were startled by a loud and splintering crash that ended with myriad tinklings as of broken glass. Turning, they saw that a huge icicle had fallen from the cavern-dome; and its point, as if aimed unerringly, had cloven the skull of Eibur Tsanth, who lay amid the débris of shattered ice with the sharp end of the fragment deeply embedded in his oozing brain. He had died, instantly, without knowledge of his doom.

The accident, it seemed, was a perfectly natural one, such as might occur in summer from a slight melting of the immense pendant; but, amid their consternation, Quanga and Hoom Feethos were compelled to take note of certain circumstances that were far from normal or explicable.

During the removal of the rubies, on which their attention had been centered so exclusively, the chamber had narrowed to half of its former

width, and had also closed down from above, till the hanging icicles were almost upon them, like the champing teeth of some tremendous mouth. The place had darkened, and the light was such as might filter into arctic seas beneath heavy floes. The incline of the cave had grown steeper, as if it were pitching into bottomless depths. Far up — incredibly far — the two men beheld the tiny entrance, which seemed no bigger than the mouth of a fox's hole.

For an instant, they were stupefied. The changes of the cavern could admit of no natural explanation; and the Hyperboreans felt the clammy surge of all the superstitious terrors that they had formerly disclaimed. No longer could they deny the conscious, animate malevolence, the diabolic powers of bale imputed to the ice in old legends.

Realizing their peril, and spurred by a wild panic, they started to climb the incline. Hoom Feethos retained the bulging pouch of rubies, as well as the heavy bag of gold coins that hung from his girdle; and Quanga had enough presence of mind to keep his sword and pick-ax. In their terror-driven haste, however, both forgot the second bag of gold, which lay beside Eibur Tسانth, under the débris of the shattered pendant.

The supernatural narrowing of the cave, the dreadful and sinister closing-down of its roof, had apparently ceased. At any rate, the Hyperboreans could detect no visible continuation of the process as they climbed frantically and precariously toward the opening. They were forced to stoop in many places to avoid the mighty fangs that threatened to descend upon them; and even with the rough tigerskin buskins that they wore, it was hard to keep their footing on the terrible slope. Sometimes they pulled themselves up by means of the slippery, pillar-like formations; and often Quanga, who led the way, was compelled to hew hasty steps in the incline with his pick.

Hoom Feethos was too terrified for even the most rudimentary reflection. But Quanga, as he climbed, was considering the monstrous alterations of the cave, which he could not align with his wide and various experience of the phenomena of nature. He tried to convince himself that he had made a singular error in estimating the chamber's dimensions and the inclination of its floor. The effort was useless: he still found himself confronted by a thing that outraged his reason; a thing that distorted the known face of the world with unearthly, hideous madness, and mingled a malign chaos with its ordered workings.

After an ascent that was frightfully prolonged, like the effort to escape from some delirious, tedious nightmare predicament, they neared the cavern-mouth. There was barely room now for a man to creep on his belly beneath the sharp and ponderous teeth. Quanga, feeling that the fangs might close upon him like those of some great monster, hurled himself forward and started to wriggle through the opening with a most unheroic celerity. Something held him back, and he thought, for one moment of stark horror, that his worst apprehensions were being realized. Then he found that his bow and quiver of arrows, which he had forgotten to remove from his shoulders, were caught against the pendant ice. While Hoom Feethos gibbered in a frenzy of fear and impatience, he crawled back and relieved himself of the impeding weapons, which he thrust before him together with his pick in a second and more successful attempt to pass through the strait opening.

Rising to his feet on the open glacier, he heard a wild cry from Hoom Feethos, who, trying to follow Quanga, had become tightly wedged in the entrance through his greater girth. His right hand, clutching the pouch of rubies, was thrust forward beyond the threshold of the cave. He howled

incessantly, with half-coherent protestations that the cruel ice-teeth were crunching him to death.

In spite of the eery terrors that had unmanned him, the hunter still retained enough courage to go back and try to assist Hoom Feethos. He was about to assail the huge icicles with his pick, when he heard an agonizing scream from the jeweler, followed by a harsh and indescribable grating. There had been no visible movement of the fangs — and yet Quanga now saw that they had reached the cavern-floor! The body of Hoom Feethos, pierced through and through by one of the icicles, and ground down by the blunter teeth, was spurting blood on the glacier, like the red mist from a wine-press.

Quanga doubted the very testimony of his senses. The thing before him was patently impossible — there was no mark of cleavage in the mound above the cavern-mouth, to explain the descent of those awful fangs. Before his very eyes, but too swiftly for direct cognition, this unthinkable enormity had occurred.

Hoom Feethos was beyond all earthly help, and Quanga, now wholly the slave of a hideous panic, would hardly have stayed longer to assist him in any case. But seeing the pouch that had fallen forward from the dead jeweler's fingers, the hunter snatched it up through an impulse of terror-mingled greed; and then, with no backward glance, he fled on the glacier, toward the low-circling sun.

For a few moments, as he ran, Quanga failed to perceive the sinister and ill-boding alterations, comparable to those of the cave, which had somehow occurred in the sheeted plain itself. With a terrific shock, which became an actual vertigo, he saw that he was climbing a long, insanely tilted slope above whose remote extreme the sun had receded strangely, and was now small and chill as if seen from an outer planet. The very sky was different:

though still perfectly cloudless, it had taken on a curious deathly pallor. A brooding sense of inimical volition, a vast and freezing malignity, seemed to pervade the air and to settle upon Quanga like an incubus. But more terrifying than all else, in its proof of a conscious and malign derangement of natural law, was the giddy poleward inclination that had been assumed by the level plateau.

Quanga felt that creation itself had gone mad, and had left him at the mercy of demoniacal forces from the godless outer gulfs. Keeping a perilous foothold, weaving and staggering laboriously upward, he feared momentarily that he would slip and fall and slide back for ever into arctic depths unfathomable. And yet, when he dared to pause at last, and turned shudderingly to peer down at the supposed descent, he saw behind him an acclivity similar in all respects to the one he was climbing; a mad, oblique wall of ice, that rose interminably to a second remote sun.

In the confusion of that strange bouleversement, he seemed to lose the last remnant of equilibrium; and the glacier reeled and pitched about him like an overturning world as he strove to recover the sense of direction that had never before deserted him. Everywhere, it appeared, there were small and wan parhelia that mocked him above unending glacial scarps. He resumed his hopeless climb through a topsy-turvy world of illusion: whether north, south, east or west, he could not tell.

A sudden wind swept downward on the glacier; it shrieked in Quanga's ears like the myriad voices of taunting devils; it moaned and laughed and ululated with shrill notes as of crackling ice. It seemed to pluck at Quanga with live malicious fingers, to suck the breath for which he fought agonizingly. In spite of his heavy raiment, and the speed of his toilsome ascent, he felt its bitter, mordant teeth, searching and biting even to the marrow.

Dimly, as he continued to climb upward, he saw that the ice was no longer smooth, but had risen into pillars and pyramids around him, or was fretted obscenely into wilder shapes. Immense, malignant profiles leered in blue-green crystal; the malformed heads of bestial devils frowned; and rearing dragons writhed immovably along the scarp, or sank frozen into deep crevasses.

Apart from these imaginary forms that were assumed by the ice itself, Quanga saw, or believed that he saw, human bodies and faces embedded in the glacier. Pale hands appeared to reach dimly and imploringly toward him from the depths; and he felt upon him the frost-bound eyes of men who had been lost in former years; and beheld their sunken limbs, grown rigid in strange attitudes of torture.

Quanga was no longer capable of thought. Deaf, blind, primordial terrors, older than reason, had filled his mind with their atavistic darkness. They drove him on implacably, as a beast is driven, and would not let him pause or flag on the mocking, nightmare slope. Reflection would have told him only that his ultimate escape was impossible; that the ice, a live and conscious and maleficent thing, was merely playing a cruel and fantastic game which it had somehow devised in its incredible animism. So, perhaps, it was well that he had lost the power of reflection.

Beyond hope and without warning, he came to the end of the glaciation. It was like the sudden shift of a dream, which takes the dreamer unaware; and he stared uncomprehendingly for some moments at the familiar Hyperborean valleys below the rampart, to the south, and the volcanoes that fumed darkly beyond the southeastern hills.

His flight from the cavern had consumed almost the whole of the long, sub-polar afternoon, and the sun was now swinging close above the horizon. The parhelia had vanished, and the ice-sheet, as if by some

prodigious legerdemain, had resumed its normal horizontality. If he had been able to compare his impressions, Quanga would have realized that at no time had he surprized the glacier in the accomplishment of its bewildering supernatural changes.

Doubtfully, as if it were a mirage that might fade at any moment, he surveyed the landscape below the battlements. To all appearances, he had returned to the very place from which he and the jewelers had begun their disastrous journey on the ice. Before him an easy declivity, fretted and runneled, ran down toward the grassy meadows. Fearing that it was all deceitful and unreal — a fair, beguiling trap, a new treachery of the element that he had grown to regard as a cruel and almighty demon — Quanga descended the slope with hasty leaps and bounds. Even when he stood ankle-deep in the great club-mosses, with leafy willows and sedgy grasses about him, he could not quite believe in the verity of his escape.

The mindless prompting of a panic fear still drove him on; and a primal instinct, equally mindless, drew him toward the volcanic peaks. The instinct told him that he would find refuge from the bitter boreal cold amid their purlieus; and there, if anywhere, he would be safe from the diabolical machinations of the glacier. Boiling springs were said to flow perpetually from the nether slopes of these mountains; great geysers, roaring and hissing like infernal cauldrons, filled the higher gullies with scalding cataracts. The long snows that swept upon Hyperborea were turned to mild rains in the vicinity of the volcanoes; and there a rich and sultry-colored flora, formerly native to the whole region, but now exotic, flourished throughout the seasons.

Quanga could not find the little shaggy horses that he and his companions had left tethered to the dwarf willows in the valley-meadow. Perhaps, after all, it was not the same valley. At any rate, he did not stay his

flight to search for them. Without delay or lingering, after one fearful backward look at the menacing mass of the glaciation, he started off in a direct line for the smoke-plumed mountains.

The sun sank lower, skirting endlessly the southwestern horizon, and flooding the battlemented ice and the rolling landscape with a light of pale amethyst. Quanga, with iron thews inured to protracted marches, pressed on in his unrelenting terror, and was overtaken gradually by the long, ethereal-tinted twilight of northern summer.

Somehow, through all the stages of his flight, he had retained the pick-ax, as well as his bow and arrows. Automatically, hours before, he had placed the heavy pouch of rubies in the bosom of his raiment for safekeeping. He had forgotten them, and he did not even notice the trickle of water from the melting of crusted ice about the jewels, that seeped upon his flesh from the lizardskin pouch.

Crossing one of the innumerable valleys, he stumbled against a protruding willow-root, and the pick was hurled from his fingers as he fell. Rising to his feet, he ran on without stopping to retrieve it.

A ruddy glow from the volcanoes was now visible on the darkening sky. It brightened as Quanga went on; and he felt that he was nearing the far-sought, inviolable sanctuary. Though still thoroughly shaken and demoralized by his preterhuman ordeals, he began to think that he might escape from the ice-demon after all.

Suddenly he became aware of a consuming thirst, to which he had been oblivious heretofore. Daring to pause in one of the shallow valleys, he drank from a blossom-bordered stream. Then, beneath the crushing load of an unconsciously accumulated fatigue, he flung himself down to rest for a little while among the blood-red poppies that were purple with twilight.

Sleep fell like a soft and overwhelming snow upon his eyelids, but was soon broken by evil dreams in which he still fled vainly from the mocking and inexorable glacier. He awoke in a cold horror, sweating and shivering, and found himself staring at the northern sky, where a delicate flush was dying slowly. It seemed to him that a great shadow, malign and massive and somehow solid, was moving upon the horizon and striding over the low hills toward the valley in which he lay. It came with inexpressible speed, and the last light appeared to fall from the heavens, chill as a reflection caught in ice.

He started to his feet with the stiffness of prolonged exhaustion in all his body, and the nightmare stupefaction of slumber still mingling with his half-awakened fears. In this state, with a mad, momentary defiance, he unslung his bow and discharged arrow after arrow, emptying his quiver at the huge and bleak and formless shadow that seemed to impend before him on the sky. Having done this, he resumed his headlong flight.

Even as he ran, he shivered uncontrollably with the sudden and intense cold that had filled the valley. Vaguely, with an access of fear, he felt that there was something unwholesome and unnatural about the cold — something that did not belong to the place or the season. The glowing volcanoes were quite near, and soon he would reach their outlying hills. The air about him should be temperate, even if not actually warm.

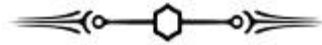
All at once, the air darkened before him, with a sourceless, blue-green glimmering in its depths. For a moment, he saw the featureless Shadow that rose gigantically upon his path and obscured the very stars and the glare of the volcanoes. Then, with the swirling of a tempest-driven vapor, it closed about him, gelid and relentless. It was like phantom ice — a thing that blinded his eyes and stifled his breath, as if he were buried in some glacial tomb. It was cold with a transarctic rigor, such as he had never known, that

ached unbearably in all his flesh, and was followed by a swiftly spreading numbness.

Dimly he heard a sound as of clashing icicles, a grinding as of heavy floes, in the blue-green gloom that tightened and thickened around him. It was as if the soul of the glacier, malign and implacable, had overtaken him in his flight. At times he struggled numbly, in half-drowsy terror. With some obscure impulse, as if to propitiate a vengeful deity, he took the pouch of rubies from his bosom with prolonged and painful effort, and tried to hurl it away. The thongs that tied the pouch were loosened by its fall, and Quanga heard faintly, as if from a great distance, the tinkle of the rubies as they rolled and scattered on some hard surface. Then oblivion deepened about him, and he fell forward stiffly, without knowing that he had fallen.

Morning found him beside the little stream, stark-frozen, and lying on his face in a circle of poppies that had been blackened as if by the footprint of some gigantic demon of frost. A near-by pool, formed by the leisurely rill, was covered with thin ice, and on the ice, like gouts of frozen blood, there lay the scattered rubies of Haalor. In its own time, the great glacier, moving slowly and irresistibly southward, would reclaim them.

The Master of the Crabs



I REMEMBER THAT I grumbled a little when Mior Lumivix awakened me. The past evening had been a tedious one with its unpleasant familiar vigil, during which I had nodded often. From sunfall till the setting of Scorpio, which occurred well after midnight at that season, it had been my duty to tend the gradual inspissation of a decoction of scarabs, much favored by Mior Lumivix in the compounding of his most requested love-potions. He had warned me often that this liquor must be thickened neither too slowly nor too rapidly, by maintaining an even fire in the athanor, and had cursed me more than once for spoiling it. Therefore, I did not yield to my drowsiness till the decoction was safely decanted and strained thrice through the sieve of perforated sharkskin.

Taciturn beyond his wont, the Master had retired early to his chamber. I knew that something troubled him; but was too tired for overmuch conjecture, and had not dared to question him.

It seemed that I had not slept for more than the period of a few pulse-beats — and here was the Master thrusting the yellow-slotted eye of his lantern into my face and dragging me from the pallet. I knew that I should not sleep again that night: for the Master wore his one-horned hat, and his cloak was girdled tightly about him, with the ancient arthame depending from the girdle in its shagreen sheath that time and the hands of many magicians had blackened.

‘Abortion fathered by a sloth!’ he cried. ‘Suckling of a sow that has eaten mandragora! Would you slumber till doomsday? We must hurry: I have

learned that Sarcand has procured the chart of Omvor and has gone forth alone to the wharves. No doubt he means to embark in quest of the temple-treasure. We must follow quickly for much time has already been lost.'

I rose now without further demur and dressed myself expeditiously, knowing well the urgency of this matter. Sarcand, who had but lately come to the city of Mirouane, had already made himself the most formidable of all my master's competitors. It was said that he was native to Naat, amid the sombre western ocean, having been begotten by a sorcerer of that isle on a woman of the black cannibals who dwell beyond its middle mountains. He combined his mother's savage nature with the dark necromantic craft of his father; and, moreover, had acquired much dubious knowledge and repute in his travels through orient kingdoms before settling in Mirouane.

The fabulous chart of Omvor, dating from lost ages, was a thing that many generations of wizards had dreamt to find. Omvor, an ancient pirate still renowned, had performed successfully a feat of impious rashness. Sailing up a closely guarded estuary by night with his small crew disguised as priests in stolen temple-barges, he had looted the fane of the Moon-God in Faraad and had carried away many of its virgins, together with gems, gold, altar-vessels, talismans, phylacteries and books of eldritch elder magic. These books were the gravest loss of all, since even the priests had never dared to copy them. They were unique and irreplaceable, containing the erudition of buried aeons.

Omvor's feat had given rise to many legends. He and his crew and the ravished virgins, in two small brigantines, had vanished ultimately amid the western seas. It was believed that they had been caught by the Black River, that terrible ocean-stream which pours with an irresistible swiftening beyond Naat to the world's end. But before that final voyage, Omvor had lightened his vessels of the looted treasure and had made a chart on which

the location of its hiding-place was indicated. This chart he had given to a former comrade who had grown too old for voyaging.

No man had ever found the treasure. But it was said that the chart still existed throughout the centuries, hidden somewhere no less securely than the loot of the Moon-God's temple. Of late there were rumours that some sailor, inheriting it from his father, had brought the map to Mirouane. Mior Lumivix, through agents both human and preterhuman, had tried vainly to trace the sailor; knowing that Sarcand and the other wizards of the city were also seeking him.

This much was known to me; and the Master told me more while, at his bidding, I collected hastily such provisions as were needed for a voyage of several days.

'I had watched Sarcand like an osprey watching its nest,' he said. 'My familiars told me that he had found the chart's owner, and had hired some thief to steal it; but they could tell me little else. Even the eyes of my devil-cat, peering through his windows, were baffled by the cuttle-fish darkness with which his magic surrounds him at will.

'Tonight I did a dangerous thing, since there was no other way. Drinking the juice of the purple dedaim, which induces profound trance, I projected my ka into his elemental-guarded chamber. The elementals knew my presence, they gathered about me in shapes of fire and shadow, menacing me unspeakably. They opposed me, they drove me forth... but I had seen — enough.'

The Master paused, bidding me gird myself with a consecrated magic sword, similar to his own but of less antiquity, which he had never before allowed me to wear. By this time I had gathered together the required provision of food and drink, storing it in a strong fish-net that I could carry easily over my shoulder by the handle. The net was one that was used

mainly for catching certain sea-reptiles, from which Mior Lumivix extracted a venom possessing unique virtue.

It was not till we had locked all the portals, and had plunged into the dark seaward-winding streets, that the Master resumed his account:

‘A man was leaving Sarcand’s chamber at the moment of my entrance. I saw him briefly, ere the black arras parted and closed; but I shall know him again. He was young and plump, with powerful sinews under the plumpness, with slanted squinting eyes in a girlish face and the swart yellow skin of a man from the southern isles. He wore the short breeks and ankle-topping boots of a mariner, being otherwise naked.

‘Sarcand was sitting with his back half-turned, holding an unrolled sheet of papyrus, yellow as the sailor’s face, to that evil, four-horned lamp which he feeds with cobras’ oil. The lamp glared like a ghoul’s eye. But I looked over his shoulder ... long enough... before his demons could hurry me from the room. The papyrus was indeed the chart of Omvor. It was stiff with age, and stained with blood and sea-water. But its title and purpose and appellations were still legible, though inscribed in an archaic script that few can read nowadays.

‘It showed the western shore of the continent Zothique, and the seas beyond. An isle lying due westward from Mirouane was indicated as the burial-place of the treasure. It was named the Island of Crabs on the chart: but plainly it is none other than the one now called Iribos which, though seldom visited, lies at a distance of only two days’ voyaging. There are no other islands within a hundred leagues, either north or south, excepting a few desolate rocks and small atolls.’

Urging me to greater haste, Mior Lumivix continued:

‘I woke too tardily from the swoon induced by the dedaim. A lesser adept would never have awakened at all.

‘My familiars warned me that Sarcand had left his house a full hour ago. He was prepared for a journey, and went wharfward. But we will overtake him. I think that he will go without companions to Iribos, desiring to keep the treasure wholly secret. He is indeed strong and terrible, but his demons are of a kind that cannot cross water, being entirely earthbound. He has left them behind with moiety of his magic. Have no fear for the outcome.’

The wharves were still and almost deserted, except for a few sleeping sailors who had succumbed to the rank wine and arrack of the taverns. Under the late moon, that had curved and sharpened to a slim scimitar, we unmoored our boat and pushed away, the Master holding the tiller, while I bent my shoulders to the broad-bladed oars. Thus we threaded the huddled maze of far-gathered ships, of xebecs and galleys, of river-barges and scows and feluccas, that thronged that immemorial harbor. The sluggish air, hardly stirring our tall lateen sail, was pregnant with sea-smells, with the reek of laden fishing-boats and the spices of exotic cargoes. None hailed us; and we heard only the calling of watchmen on shadowy decks, proclaiming the hour in outlandish tongues.

Our boat, though small and open, was stoutly built of orient beef-wood. Sharply prowed and deeply keeled, with high bulwarks, it had proven itself seaworthy even in tempests such as were not to be apprehended at this season.

Blowing over Mirouane, from fields and orchards and desert kingdoms, a wind freshened behind us as we cleared the harbor. It stiffened, till the sail bellied like a dragon’s wing. The furrows of foam curved high beside our sharp prow, as we followed Capricornus down the west.

Far out on the waters before us, in the dim moonlight, something seemed to move, to dance and waver like a phantom. Perhaps it was Sarcand’s boat... or another’s. Doubtless, the Master also saw it; but he said only:

‘You may sleep now.’

So I, Manthar the apprentice, composed myself to slumber, while Mior Lumivix steered on, and the starry hooves and horns of the Goat sank seaward.

The sun was high above our stern when I awakened. The wind still blew, strong and favorable, driving us into the west with unabated speed. We had passed beyond sight of the shore-line of Zothique. The sky was void of clouds, the sea vacant of any sail, unrolling before us like a vast scroll of sombre azure, lined only with the shifting and fading foamcrests.

The day went by, ebbing beyond the still-empty horizon; and night overtook us like the heaven-blotting purple sail of a god, sewn with the Signs and planets. The night too went over, and a second dawn.

All this time, without sleeping, the Master had steered the boat, with eyes peering implacably westward like those of an ocean-hawk; and I wondered greatly at his endurance. Now for awhile he slept, sitting upright at the helm. But it seemed that his eyes were still vigilant behind their lids; and his hand still held the rudder straight, without slackening.

In a few hours the Master opened his eyes; but hardly stirred from the posture he maintained throughout.

He had spoken little during our voyage. I did not question him, knowing that he would tell me whatever was needed at the due time. But I was full of curiosities; and was not without fear and doubt regarding Sarcand, whose rumored necromancies might well have dismayed others than a mere novice. I could surmise nothing of the Master’s thoughts, except that they concerned dark and esoteric matters.

Having slept for the third time since our embarkment, I was roused by the Master crying loudly. In the dimness of the third dawn, an island towered before us, impending with jagged cliffs and jotting crags, and

barring the sea for several leagues to northward and southward. It was shaped somewhat like a monster, facing north. Its head was a high-horned promontory, dipping a great griffin-like beak in the ocean.

‘This is Iribos,’ the Master told me. ‘The sea is strong about it, with strange tides and perilous currents. There are no landing-places on this side, and we must not venture too close. We must round the northern headland. There is a small cove amid the western cliffs, entered only through a sea-cavern. It is there that the treasure lies.’

We tacked northward slowly and deviously against the wind, at a distance of three or four bow-shots from the island. As our sea-craft was required to make progress: for the wind strengthened wildly, as if swollen by the breath of devils. Above its howling we heard the surf’s clamor upon those monstrous rocks that rose bare and gaunt from cerements of foam.

‘The isle is unpeopled,’ said Mior Lumivix. ‘It is shunned by sailors and even by the sea-fowl. Men say that the curse of the maritime gods was laid upon it long ago, forbidding it to any but the creatures of the submarine deep. Its coves and caverns are haunted by crabs and octopi... and perhaps by stranger things.’

We sailed on in a tedious serpentine course, beaten back at times or borne perilously shoreward by the shifting gusts that opposed us like evil demons. The sun climbed in the orient, shining starkly down on the desolation of crags and scarps that was Iribos. Still we tacked and veered; and I seemed to sense the beginning of a strange unease in the Master. But of this, if such there was, his manner betrayed no sign.

It was almost noon when we rounded at last the long beak of the northern promontory. There, when we turned southerly, the wind fell in a weird stillness, and the sea was miraculously calmed as if by wizard oils. Our sail hung limp and useless above mirror-like waters, in which it seemed

that the boat's reflected image and ours, unbroken, moveless, might float forever amid the unchanging reflection of the monstershaped isle. We both began to ply the oars; but even thus the boat crawled with a singular slowness.

I observed the isle strictly as we passed along, noting several inlets where, to all appearance, a vessel could have landed readily.

'There is much danger here,' said Mior Lumivix, without elucidating his statement.

Again, as we continued, the cliffs became a wall that was broken only by rifts and chasms. They were crowned in places by a sparse, funereal-colored vegetation that hardly served to soften their formidable aspect. High up in the clefted rocks, where it seemed that no natural tide or tempest could have flung them, I observed the scattered spars and timbers of antique vessels.

'Row closer,' enjoined the Master. 'We are nearing the cavern that leads to the hidden inlet.'

Even as we veered landward through the crystalline calm, there was a sudden seething and riffling about us, as if some monster had risen beneath. The boat began to shoot with plummet-like speed toward the cliffs, the sea foaming and streaming all around as though some kraken were dragging us to its caverned lair. Borne like a leaf on a cataract, we toiled vainly with straining oars against the ineluctable current.

Heaving higher momentarily, the cliffs seemed to shear the heavens above us, unscalable, without ledge or foothold. Then, in the sheer wall, appeared the low, broad arch of a cavern-mouth that we had not discerned heretofore, toward which the boat was drawn with dreadful swiftness.

'It is the entrance!' cried the Master. 'But some wizard tide has flooded it.'

We shipped our useless oars and crouched down behind the thwarts as we neared the opening: for it seemed that the lowness of the arch would afford bare passage to our high-built prow. There was no time to unstep the mast, which broke instantly like a reed as we raced on without slackening into blind torrential darkness.

Half-stunned, and striving to extricate myself from the fallen, spar-weighted sail, I felt the chillness of water splashing about me and knew that the boat was filling and sinking. A moment more, and the water was in my ears and eyes and nostrils: but even as I sank and drowned there was still the sense of swift onward motion. Then it seemed dimly that arms were around me in the strangling darkness; and I rose suddenly, choking and gasping and spewing, into sunlight.

When I had rid my lungs of the brine and regained my senses more fully, I found that Mior Lumivix and I were floating in a small haven, shaped like a half-moon, and surrounded by crags and pinnacles of sullen-colored rock. Close by, in a sheer, straight wall, was the inner mouth of the cavern through which the mysterious current had carried us, with faint ripples spreading around it and fading away into water smooth and green as a platter of jade. Opposite, on the haven's farther side, was the long curve of a shelving beach strewn with boulders and driftwood. A boat resembling ours, with an unshipped mast and a furled sail the color of fresh blood, was moored to the beach. Near it, from the shoaling water, protruded the broken-off mast of another boat, whose sunken outlines we discerned obscurely. Two objects which we took for human figures were lying half in and half out of the shallows a little farther along the strand. At that distance we could hardly know whether they were living men or cadavers. Their contours were half-hidden by what seemed a curious sort of brownish-

yellow drapery that trailed away amid the rocks, appearing to move and shift and waver incessantly.

‘There is mystery here,’ said Mior Lumivix in a low voice. ‘We must proceed with care and circumspection.’

We swam ashore at the near end of the beach, where it narrowed like the tip of a crescent moon to meet the sea-wall. Taking his arthame from its sheath the Master wiped it dry with the hem of his cloak, bidding me do likewise with my own weapon lest the brine corrode it. Then, hiding the wizard blades beneath our raiment, we followed the broadening beach toward the moored boat and the two reclining figures.

‘This is indeed the place of Omvor’s chart,’ observed the Master. ‘The boat with the blood-red sail belongs to Sarcand. No doubt he has found the cave, which lies hidden somewhere among the rocks. But who are these others? I do not think that they came with Sarcand.’

As we neared the figures, the appearance of a yellowish brown drapery that covered them resolved itself in its true nature. It consisted of a great number of crabs who were crawling over their half-submerged bodies and running to and fro behind a heap of immense boulders.

We went forward and stopped over the bodies, from which the crabs were busily detaching morsels of bloody flesh. One of the bodies lay on its face; the other stared with half-eaten features at the sun. Their skin, or what remained of it, was a swarthy yellow. Both were clad in short purple breeks and sailor’s boots, being otherwise naked.

‘What hellishness is this?’ inquired the Master. ‘These men are but newly dead — and already the crabs rend them. Such creatures are wont to wait for the softening of decomposition. And look — they do not even devour the morsels they have torn, but bear them away.’

This indeed was true, for I saw now that a constant procession of crabs departed from the bodies, each carrying a shred of flesh, to vanish beyond the rocks; while another procession came, or perhaps returned, with empty pincers.

‘I think,’ said Mior Lumivix, ‘that the man with the upturned face is the sailor that I saw leaving Sarcand’s room; the thief who had stolen the chart for Sarcand from its owner.’

In my horror and disgust I had picked up a fragment of rock and was about to crush some of the hideously laden crabs as they crawled away from the corpses.

‘Nay,’ the Master stayed me, ‘let us follow them.’

Rounding the great heap of boulders, we saw that the twofold procession entered, and emerged from, the mouth of a cavern that had heretofore been hidden from view.

With hands tightening on the hilts of our arthames, we went cautiously and circumspectly toward the cavern and paused a little short of its entrance. From this vantage, however, nothing was visible within except the lines of crawling crabs.

‘Enter!’ cried a sonorous voice that seemed to prolong and repeat the word in far-receding reverberations, like the voice of a ghoul echoing in some profound sepulchral vault.

The voice was that of the sorcerer Sarcand. The Master looked at me, with whole volumes of warning in his narrowed eyes and we entered the cavern.

The place was high-domed and of indeterminable extent. Light was afforded by a great rift in the vault above, through which, at this hour, the direct rays of the sun slanted in, falling goldenly on the cavern’s foreground and tipping with light the great fangs of stalactites and stalagmites in the

gloom beyond. At one side was a pool of water, fed by a thin rill from a spring that dripped somewhere in the darkness.

With the shafted splendor shining full upon him, Sarcand reposed half-sitting, half-recumbent, with his back against an open chest of age-darkened bronze. His huge ebon-black body, powerfully muscled though inclining toward corpulence, was nude except for a necklace of rubies, each the size of a plover's egg, that depended about his throat. His crimson sarong, strangely tattered, bared his legs as they lay outstretched amid the cavern's rubble. The right leg had manifestly been broken somewhere below the knee, for it was rudely bound with splints of driftwood and strips torn from the sarong.

Sarcand's cloak of lazuli-colored silk was outspread beside him. It was strewn with graven gems and amulets, with gold coins and jewel-crusted altar-vessels, that flashed and glittered amid volumes of parchments and papyrus. A book with black metal covers lay open as if newly put aside, showing illuminations drawn in fiery ancient inks.

Beside the book, within reach of Sarcand's fingers, was a mound of raw and bloody shreds. Over the cloak, over the coins and scrolls and jewels, crawled the incoming lines of crabs, each of which added its torn-off morsel to the mound and then crept on to join the outgoing column.

I could well believe the tales regarding Sarcand's ancestry, indeed, it seemed that he favored his mother entirely: for his hair and features as well as his skin were those of the Negro cannibals of Naat as I had seen them depicted in travelers' drawings. He fronted us inscrutably, his arms crossed on his bosom. I noticed a great emerald shining darkly on the index finger of his right hand.

'I knew that you would follow me,' he said, 'even as I knew that the thief and his companion would follow. All of you have thought to slay me and

take the treasure. It is true that I have suffered an injury: a fragment of loosened rock fell from the cavern-roof, breaking my leg as I bent over to inspect the treasures in the opened chest. I must lie here till the bone has knit. In the meanwhile I am well armed... and well served and guarded.'

'We came to take the treasure,' replied Mior Lumivix directly. 'I had thought to slay you, but only in fair combat, man to man and wizard to wizard, with none but my neophyte Manthar and the rocks of Iribos for witness.'

'Aye, and your neophyte is also armed with an arthame. However, it matters little. I shall feast on your liver, Mior Lumivix, and wax stronger by such power of sorcery as was yours.'

This the Master appeared to disregard.

'What foulness have you conjured now?' he inquired sharply, pointing to the crabs who were still depositing their morsels on the grisly mound.

Sarcand held aloft the hand on whose index finger gleamed the immense emerald, set, as we now perceived, in a ring that was wrought with the tentacles of a kraken clasping the orblike gem.

'I found this ring amid the treasure,' he boasted. 'It was closed in a cylinder of unknown metal, together with a scroll that informed me of the ring's uses and its mighty magic. It is the signet-ring of Basatan, the sea-god. He who looks long and deeply into the emerald may behold distant scenes and happenings at will. He who wears the ring can exert control over the winds and currents of the sea and over the sea's creatures, by describing certain signs in air with his finger.'

While Sarcand spoke it seemed that the green jewel brightened and darkened and deepened strangely, like a tiny window with all the sea's mystery and immensity lying beyond. Enthralled and entranced, I forgot the circumstances of our situation: for the jewel swelled upon my vision,

blotting from view the black fingers of Sarcand, with a swirling as of tides and of shadowy fins and tentacles far down in its glimmering greenness.

‘Beware, Manthar,’ the Master murmured in my ear. ‘We face a dreadful magic, and must retain the command of all our faculties. Avert your eyes from the emerald.’

I obeyed the dimly heard whisper. The vision dwindled away, vanishing swiftly, and the form and features of Sarcand returned. His lubber lips were curved in a broad sardonic grin, showing his strong white teeth that were pointed like those of a shark. He dropped the huge hand that wore the signet of Basatan, plunging it into the chest behind him and bringing it forth filled with many-tinted gems, with pearls, opals, sapphires, bloodstones, diamonds, chatoyants. These he let dribble in a flashing rill from his fingers, as he resumed his peroration:

‘I preceded you to Iribos by many hours. It was known to me that the outer cavern could be entered safely only at low tide, with an unstepped mast.

‘Perhaps you have already inferred whatever else I might tell you. At any rate the knowledge will perish with you very shortly.

‘After learning the uses of the ring I was able to watch the seas round Iribos in the jewel. Lying here with my shattered leg, I saw the approach of the thief and his fellow. I called up the sea-current by which their boat was drawn into the flooded cavern, sinking swiftly. They would have swum ashore: but at my command the crabs in the haven drew them under and drowned them; letting the tide beach their corpses later... That cursed thief! I had paid him well for the stolen chart, which he was too ignorant to read, suspecting only that it concerned a treasure-trove...

‘Still later I trapped you in the same fashion, after delaying you awhile with contrary winds and an adverse calm. I have preserved you, however,

for another doom than drowning.’

The voice of the necromancer sank away in profound echoes, leaving a silence fraught with insufferable suspense. It seemed that we stood amid the gaping of undiscovered gulfs, in a place of awful darkness, lit only by the eyes of Sarcand and the ring’s talismanic jewel.

The spell that had fallen upon me was broken by the cold ironic tones of the Master:

‘Sarcand, there is another sorcery that you have not mentioned.’

Sarcand’s laughter was like the sound of a mounting surf. ‘I follow the custom of my mother’s people; and the crabs serve me with that which I require, summoned and constrained by the sea-god’s ring.’

So saying, he raised his hand and described a peculiar sign with the index finger, on which the ring flashed like a circling orb. The double column of crabs suspended their crawling for a moment. Then, moved as if by a single impulse, they began to scuttle toward us, while others appeared from the cavern’s entrance and from its inner recesses to swell their rapidly growing numbers. They surged upon us with a speed beyond belief, assailing our ankles and shins with their knife-sharp pincers as if animated by demons. I stooped over, striking and thrusting with my arthame; but the few that I crushed in this manner were replaced by scores; while others, catching the hem of my cloak, began to climb it from behind and weigh it down. Thus encumbered, I lost my footing on the slippery ground and fell backward amid the scuttling multitude.

Lying there while the crabs poured over me like a seething wave, I saw the Master shed his burdened cloak and cast it aside. Then, while the spell-drawn army still besieged him, climbing upon each other’s backs and scaling his very knees and thighs, he hurled his arthame with a strange circular motion at the upraised arm of Sarcand. Straightly the blade flew,

revolving like a disk of brightness; and the hand of the black necromancer was sundered cleanly at the wrist, and the ring flashed on its index finger like a falling star as it fell groundward.

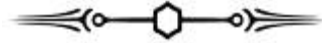
Blood spouted in a fountain from the handless wrist, while Sarcand sat as in a stupor, maintaining for a brief instant the gesture of his conjuration. Then his arm dropped to his side and the blood rilled out upon the littered cloak, spreading swiftly amid the gems and coins and volumens, and staining the mound of crab-deposited morsels. As if the arm's movement had been another signal, the crabs fell away from the Master and myself and swarmed in a long, innumerable tide toward Sarcand. They covered his legs, they climbed his great torso, they scrambled for place on his escalated shoulders. He tore them away with his one hand, roaring terrible curses and imprecations that rolled in countless echoes throughout the cavern. But the crabs still assailed him as if driven by some demoniac frenzy; and blood trickled forth more and more copiously from the small wounds they had made, to suffuse their pincers and streak their shells with broadening rillets of crimson.

It seemed that long hours went by while the Master and I stood watching. At last the prostrate thing that was Sarcand had ceased to heave and toss under the living shroud that enswathed it. Only the splint-bound leg and the lopped-off hand with the ring of Basatan remained untouched by the loathsomely busied crabs.

‘Faugh!’ the Master exclaimed. ‘He left his devils behind when he came here; but he found others... It is time that we went out for a walk in the sun. Manthar, my good lubberly apprentice, I would have you build a fire of driftwood on the beach. Pile on the fuel without sparing, to make a bed of coals deep and hot and red as the hearth of hell, in which to roast us a dozen

crabs. But be careful to choose the ones that have come freshly from the sea.'

The Enchantress of Sylaire



‘WHY, YOU BIG ninny! I could never marry you,’ declared the demoiselle Dorothee, only daughter of the Sieur des Flèches. Her lips pouted at Anselme like two ripe berries. Her voice was honey — but honey filled with bee-stings.

‘You are not so ill-looking. And your manners are fair. But I wish I had a mirror that could show you to yourself for the fool that you really are.’

‘Why?’ queried Anselme, hurt and puzzled.

‘Because you are just an addle-headed dreamer, pouring over books like a monk. You care for nothing but silly old romances and legends. People say that you even write verses. It is lucky that you are at least the second son of the Comte du Framboisier — for you will never be anything more than that.’

‘But you loved me a little yesterday,’ said Anselme, bitterly. A woman finds nothing good in the man she has ceased to love.

‘Dolt! Donkey!’ cried Dorothee, tossing her blonde ringlets in pettish arrogance. ‘If you were not all that I have said, you would never remind me of yesterday. Go, idiot — and do not return.’

Anselme, the hermit, had slept little, tossing distractedly on his hard, narrow pallet. His blood, it seemed, had been fevered by the sultriness of the summer night.

Then, too, the natural heat of youth had contributed to his unease. He had not wanted to think of women — a certain woman in particular. But, after thirteen months of solitude, in the heart of the wild woodland of

Averoigne, he was still far from forgetting. Crueller even than her taunts was the remembered beauty of Dorothee des Flèches: the full-ripened mouth, the round arms and slender waist, the breast and hips that had not yet acquired their amplest curves.

Dreams had thronged the few short intervals of slumber, bringing other visitants, fair but nameless, about his couch.

He rose at sundown, weary but restless. Perhaps he would find refreshment by bathing, as he had often done, in a pool fed from the river Isoile and hidden among alder and willow thickets. The water, deliciously cool at that hour, would assuage his feverishness.

His eyes burned and smarted in the morning's gold glare when he emerged from the hut of wattled osier withes. His thoughts wandered, still full of the night's disorder. Had he been wise, after all, to quit the world, to leave his friends and family, and seclude himself because of a girl's unkindness? He could not deceive himself into thinking that he had become a hermit through any aspiration toward sainthood, such as had sustained the old anchorites. By dwelling so much alone, was he not merely aggravating the malady he had sought to cure?

Perhaps, it occurred to him belatedly, he was proving himself the ineffectual dreamer, the idle fool that Dorothee had accused him of being. It was weakness to let himself be soured by a disappointment.

Walking with downcast eyes, he came unaware to the thickets that fringed the pool. He parted the young willows without lifting his gaze, and was about to cast off his garments. But at that instant the nearby sound of splashing water startled him from his abstraction.

With some dismay, Anselme realized that the pool was already occupied. To his further consternation, the occupant was a woman. Standing near to the center, where the pool deepened, she stirred the water with her hands till

it rose and rippled against the base of her bosom. Her pale wet skin glistened like white rose-petals dipped in dew.

Anselme's dismay turned to curiosity and then to unwilling delight. He told himself that he wanted to withdraw but feared to frighten the bather by a sudden movement. Stooping with her clear profile and her shapely left shoulder toward him, she had not perceived his presence.

A woman, young and beautiful, was the last sight he had wished to see. Nevertheless, he could not turn his eyes away. The woman was a stranger to him, and he felt that she was no girl of the village or countryside. She was lovely as any chatelaine of the great castles of Averroigne. And yet surely no lady or demoiselle would bathe unattended in a forest pool.

Thick-curling chestnut hair, bound by a light silver fillet, billowed over her shoulders and burned to red, living gold where the sun-rays searched it out through the foliage. Hung about her neck, a light golden chain seemed to reflect the lusters of her hair, dancing between her breasts as she played with the ripples.

The hermit stood watching her like a man caught in webs of sudden sorcery. His youth mounted within him, in response to her beauty's evocation.

Seeming to tire of her play, she turned her back and began to move toward the opposite shore, where, as Anselme now noticed, a pile of feminine garments lay in charming disorder on the grass. Step by step she rose from the shoaling water, revealing hips and thighs like those of an antique Venus.

Then, beyond her, he saw that a huge wolf, appearing furtively as a shadow from the thicket, had stationed itself beside the heap of clothing. Anselme had never seen such a wolf before. He remembered the tales of werewolves, that were believed to infest that ancient wood, and his alarm

was touched instantly with the fear which only preternatural things can arouse. The beast was strangely colored, its fur being a glossy bluish-black. It was far larger than the common gray wolves of the forest. Crouching inscrutably, half hidden in the sedges, it seemed to await the woman as she waded shoreward.

Another moment, thought Anselme, and she would perceive her danger, would scream and turn in terror. But still she went on, her head bent forward as if in serene meditation. 'Beware the wolf!' he shouted, his voice strangely loud and seeming to break a magic stillness. Even as the words left his lips, the wolf trotted away and disappeared behind the thickets toward the great elder forest of oaks and beeches. The woman smiled over her shoulder at Anselme, turning a short oval face with slightly slanted eyes and lips red as pomegranate flowers. Apparently she was neither frightened by the wolf nor embarrassed by Anselme's presence.

'There is nothing to fear,' she said, in a voice like the pouring of warm honey. 'One wolf, or two, will hardly attack me.'

'But perhaps there are others lurking about,' persisted Anselme. 'And there are worse dangers than wolves for one who wanders alone and unattended through the forest of Averoine. When you have dressed, with your permission I shall attend you safely to your home, whether it be near or far.'

'My home lies near enough in one sense, and far enough in another,' returned the lady, cryptically. 'But you may accompany me there if you wish.'

She turned to the pile of garments, and Anselme went a few paces away among the alders and busied himself by cutting a stout cudgel for weapon against wild beasts or other adversaries. A strange but delightful agitation possessed him, and he nearly nicked his fingers several times with the knife.

The misogyny that had driven him to a woodland hermitage began to appear slightly immature, even juvenile. He had let himself be wounded too deeply and too long by the injustice of a pert child.

By the time Anselme finished cutting his cudgel, the lady had completed her toilet. She came to meet him, swaying like a lamia. A bodice of vernal green velvet, baring the upper slopes of her breasts, clung tightly about her as a lover's embrace. A purple velvet gown, flowered with pale azure and crimson, moulded itself to the sinuous outlines of her hips and legs. Her slender feet were enclosed in fine soft leather buskins, scarlet-dyed, with tips curling pertly upward. The fashion of her garments, though oddly antique, confirmed Anselme in his belief that she was a person of no common rank.

Her raiment revealed, rather than concealed, the attributes of her femininity. Her manner yielded — but it also withheld.

Anselme bowed before her with a courtly grace that belied his rough country garb.

‘Ah! I can see that you have not always been a hermit,’ she said, with soft mockery in her voice.

‘You know me, then,’ said Anselme.

‘I know many things. I am Sephora, the enchantress. It is unlikely that you have heard of me, for I dwell apart, in a place that none can find — unless I permit them to find it.’

‘I know little of enchantment,’ admitted Anselme. ‘But I can believe that you are an enchantress.’

For some minutes they had followed a little used path that serpentine through the antique wood. It was a path the hermit had never come upon before in all his wanderings. Lithe saplings and low-grown boughs of huge beeches pressed closely upon it. Anselme, holding them aside for his

companion, came often in thrilling contact with her shoulder and arm. Often she swayed against him, as if losing her balance on the rough ground. Her weight was a delightful burden, too soon relinquished. His pulses coursed tumultuously and would not quiet themselves again.

Anselme had quite forgotten his eremitic resolves. His blood and his curiosity, were excited more and more. He ventured various gallantries, to which Sephora gave provocative replies. His questions, however, she answered with elusive vagueness. He could learn nothing, could decide nothing, about her. Even her age puzzled him: at one moment he thought her a young girl, the next, a mature woman.

Several times, as they went on, he caught glimpses of black fur beneath the low, shadow foliage. He felt sure that the strange black wolf he had seen by the pool was accompanying them with a furtive surveillance. But somehow his sense of alarm was dulled by the enchantment that had fallen upon him.

Now the path steepened, climbing a densely wooded hill. The trees thinned to straggly, stunted pines, encircling a brown, open moorland as the tonsure encircles a monk's crown. The moor was studded with Druidic monoliths, dating from ages prior to the Roman occupation of Averoine. Almost at its center, there towered a massive cromlech, consisting of two upright slabs that supported a third like the lintel of a door. The path ran straight to the cromlech.

'This is the portal of my domain,' said Sephora, as they neared it. 'I grow faint with fatigue. You must take me in your arms and carry me through the ancient doorway.'

Anselme obeyed very willingly. Her cheeks paled, her eyelids fluttered and fell as he lifted her. For a moment he thought that she had fainted; but her arms crept warm and clinging around his neck.

Dizzy with the sudden vehemence of his emotion, he carried her through the cromlech. As he went, his lips wandered across her eyelids and passed deliriously to the soft red flame of her lips and the rose pallor of her throat. Once more she seemed to faint, beneath his fervor.

His limbs melted and a fiery blindness filled his eyes. The earth seemed to yield beneath them like an elastic couch as he and Sephora sank down.

Lifting his head, Anselme looked about him with swiftly growing bewilderment. He had carried Sephora only a few paces — and yet the grass on which they lay was not the sparse and sun-dried grass of the moor, but was deep, verdant and filled with tiny vernal blossoms! Oaks and beeches, huger even than those of the familiar forest, loomed umbrageously on every hand with masses of new, golden-green leafage, where he had thought to see the open upland. Looking back, he saw that the gray, lichened slabs of the cromlech itself alone rearmed of that former landscape.

Even the sun had changed its position. It had hung at Anselme's left, still fairly low in the east, when he and Sephora had reached the moorland. But now, shining with amber rays through a rift in the forest, it had almost touched the horizon on his right.

He recalled that Sephora had told him she was an enchantress. Here, indeed, was proof of sorcery! He eyed her with curious doubts and misgivings.

'Be not alarmed,' said Sephora, with a honeyed smile of reassurance. 'I told you that the cromlech was the doorway to my domain. We are now in a land lying outside of time and space as you have hitherto known them. The very seasons are different here. But there is no sorcery involved, except that of the great ancient Druids, who knew the secret of this hidden realm and reared those mighty slabs for a portal between the worlds. If you should

weary of me, you can pass back at any time through the doorway. — But I hope that you have not tired of me so soon—’

Anselme, though still bewildered, was relieved by this information. He proceeded to prove that the hope expressed by Sephora was well-founded. Indeed, he proved it so lengthily and in such detail that the sun had fallen below the horizon before Sephora could draw a full breath and speak again.

‘The air grows chill,’ she said, pressing against him and shivering lightly. ‘But my home is close at hand.’

They came in the twilight to a high round tower among trees and grass-grown mounds.

‘Ages ago,’ announced Sephora, ‘there was a great castle here. Now the tower alone remains, and I am its chatelaine, the last of my family. The tower and the lands about it are named Sylaire.’

Tall dim tapers lit the interior, which was hung with rich arrases, vaguely and strangely pictured. Aged, corpse-pale servants in antique garb went to and fro with the furtiveness of specters, setting wines and foods before the enchantress and her guest in a broad hall. The wines were of rare flavor and immense age, the foods were curiously spiced. Anselme ate and drank copiously. It was like some fantastic dream, and he accepted his surroundings as a dreamer does, untroubled by their strangeness.

The wines were potent, drugging his senses into warm oblivion. Even stronger was the inebriation of Sephora’s nearness.

However, Anselme was a little startled when the huge black wolf he had seen that morning entered the hall and fawned like a dog at the feet of his hostess.

“You see, he is quite tame,” she said, tossing the wolf bits of meat from her plate. ‘Often I let him come and go in the tower; and sometimes he attends me when I go forth from Sylaire.’

‘He is a fierce-looking beast,’ Anselme observed doubtfully. It seemed that the wolf understood the words, for he bared his teeth at Anselme, with a hoarse, preternaturally deep growl. Spots of red fire glowed in his somber eyes, like coals fanned by devils in dark pits.

‘Go away, Malachie,’ commanded the enchantress, sharply. The wolf obeyed her, slinking from the hall with a malign backward glance at Anselme.

‘He does not like you,’ said Sephora. ‘That, however, is perhaps not surprising.’

Anselme, bemused with wine and love, forgot to inquire the meaning of her last words.

Morning came too soon, with upward-slanting beams that fired the tree-tops around the tower.

‘You must leave me for awhile,’ said Sephora, after they had breakfasted. ‘I have neglected my magic of late — and there are matters into which I should inquire.’

Bending prettily, she kissed the palms of his hands. Then, with backward glances and smiles, she retired to a room at the tower’s top beside her bed-chamber. Here, she had told Anselme, her grimoires and potions and other appurtenances of magic were kept.

During her absence, Anselme decided to go out and explore the woodland about the tower. Mindful of the black wolf, whose tameness he did not trust despite Sephora’s reassurances, he took with him the cudgel he had cut that previous day in the thickets near the Isoile.

There were paths everywhere, all leading to fresh loveliness. Truly, Sylaire was a region of enchantment. Drawn by the dreamy golden light, and the breeze laden with the freshness of spring flowers, Anselme wandered on from glade to glade.

He came to a grassy hollow, where a tiny spring bubbled from beneath mossed boulders. He seated himself on one of the boulders, musing on the strange happiness that had entered his life so unexpectedly. It was like one of the old romances, the tales of glamor and fantasy, that he had loved to read. Smiling, he remembered the gibes with which Dorothee des Flèches had expressed her disapproval of his taste for such reading-matter. What, he wondered, would Dorothee think now? At any rate, she would hardly care -

His reflections were interrupted. There was a rustling of leaves, and the black wolf emerged from the boscage in front of him, whining as if to attract his attention. The beast had somehow lost his appearance of fierceness.

Curious, and a little alarmed, Anselme watched in wonder while the wolf began to uproot with his paws certain plants that somewhat resembled wild garlic. These he devoured with palpable eagerness.

Anselme's mouth gaped at the thing which ensued. One moment the wolf was before him. Then, where the wolf had been, there rose up the figure of a man, lean, powerful, with blue-black hair and beard, and darkly flaming eyes. The hair grew almost to his brows, the beard nearly to his lower eye-lashes. His arms, legs, shoulders and chest were matted with bristles.

'Be assured that I mean you no harm,' said the man. 'I am Malachie du Marais, a sorcerer, and the one-time lover of Sephora. Tiring of me, and fearing my wizardry, she turned me into a werewolf by giving me secretly the waters of a certain pool that lies amid this enchanted domain of Sylaire. The pool is cursed from old time with the infection of lycanthropy — and Sephora has added her spells to its power. I can throw off the wolf shape for a little while during the dark of the moon. At other times I can regain my

human form, though only for a few minutes, by eating the root that you saw me dig and devour. The root is very scarce.'

Anselme felt that the sorceries of Sylaire were more complicated than he had hitherto imagined. But amid his bewilderment he was unable to trust the weird being before him. He had heard many tales of werewolves, who were reputedly common in medieval France. Their ferocity, people said, was that of demons rather than of mere brutes.

'Allow me to warn you of the grave danger in which you stand,' continued Malachie du Marais. 'You were rash to let yourself be enticed by Sephora. If you are wise, you will leave the purlieus of Sylaire with all possible dispatch. The land is old in evil and sorcery, and all who dwell within it are ancient as the land, and are equally accursed. The servants of Sephora, who waited upon you yestereve, are vampires that sleep by day in the tower vaults and come forth by night. They go out through the Druid portal, to prey on the people of Averoigne.'

He paused as if to emphasize the words that followed. His eyes glittered balefully, and his deep voice assumed a hissing undertone. 'Sephora herself is an ancient lamia, well-nigh immortal, who feeds on the vital forces of young men. She has had many lovers throughout the ages — and I must deplore, even though I cannot specify, their ultimate fate. The youth and beauty that she retains are illusions. If you could see Sephora as she really is, you would recoil in revulsion, cured of your perilous love; You would see her — unthinkably old, and hideous with infamies.'

'But how can such things be?' queried Anselme. 'Truly, I cannot believe you.'

Malachie shrugged his hairy shoulders. 'At least I have warned you. But the wolf-change approaches, and I must go. If you will come to me later, in my abode which lies a mile to the westward of Sephora's tower, perhaps I

can convince you that my statements are the truth. In the meanwhile, ask yourself if you have seen any mirrors, such as a beautiful young woman would use, in Sephora's chamber. Vampires and lamias are afraid of mirrors — for a good reason.'

Anselme went back to the tower with a troubled mind. What Malachie had told him was incredible. Yet there was the matter of Sephora's servants. He had hardly noticed their absence that morning — and yet he had not seen them since the previous eve — And he could not remember any mirrors among Sephora's various feminine belongings.

He found Sephora awaiting him in the tower's lower hall. One glance at the utter sweetness of her womanhood, and he felt ashamed of the doubts with which Maiachie had inspired him.

Sephora's blue-gray eyes questioned him, deep and tender as those of some pagan goddess of love. Reserving no detail, he told her of his meeting with the werewolf.

'Ah! I did well to trust my intuitions,' she said. 'Last night, when the black wolf growled and glowered at you, it occurred to me that he was perhaps becoming more dangerous than I had realized; This morning, in my chamber of magic, I made use of my clairvoyant powers and I learned much. Indeed, I have been careless. Malachie has become a menace to my security. Also, he hates you, and would destroy our happiness.'

'Is it true, then,' questioned Anselme, 'that he was your lover, and that you turned him into a werewolf?'

'He was my lover — long, long ago. But the werewolf form was his own choice, assumed out of evil curiosity by drinking from the pool of which he told you. He has regretted it since, for the wolf shape, while giving him certain powers of harm, in reality limits his actions and his sorceries. He

wishes to return to human shape, and if he succeeds, will become doubly dangerous to us both.

‘I should have watched him well — for I now find that he has stolen from me the recipe of antidote to the werewolf waters. My clairvoyance tells me that he has already brewed the antidote, in the brief intervals of humanity regained by chewing a certain root. When he drinks the potion, as I think that he means to do before long, he will regain human form permanently. He waits only for the dark of the moon, when the werewolf spell is at its weakest.’

‘But why should Malachie hate me?’ asked Anselme. ‘And how can I help you against him?’

‘That first question is slightly stupid, my dear. Of course, he is jealous of you. As for helping me — well, I thought of a good trick to play on Malachie.’

She produced a small purple glass vial, triangular in shape, from the folds of her bodice.

‘This vial,’ she told him, ‘is filled with the water of the werewolf pool. Through my clairvoyant vision, I learned that Malachie keeps his newly brewed potion in a vial of similar size, shape and color. If you can go to his den and substitute one vial for the other without detection, I believe that the results will be quite amusing.’

‘Indeed, I will go,’ Anselme assured her.

‘The present should be a favorable time,’ said Sephora. ‘It is now within an hour of noon; and Malachie often hunts at this time. If you should find him in his den, or he should return while you are there, you can say that you came in response to his invitation.’

She gave Anselme careful instructions that would enable to find the werewolf’s den without delay. Also, she gave him a sword, saying that the

blade had been tempered to the chanting of magic spells that made it effective against such beings as Malachie. ‘The wolf’s temper has grown uncertain,’ she warned. ‘If he should attack you, your alder stick would ‘prove a poor weapon.’

It was easy to locate the den, for well-used paths ran toward it with little deviation. The place was the mounded remnant of a tower that had crumbled down into grassy earth and mossy blocks. The entrance had once been a lofty doorway: now it was only a hole, such as a large animal would make in leaving and returning to its burrow.

Anselme hesitated before the hole. ‘Are you there, Malachie du Marais?’ he shouted. There was no answer, no sound of movement from within. Anselme shouted once more. At last, stooping on hands and knees, he entered the den.

Light poured through several apertures, latticed with wandering tree-roots, where the mound had fallen in from above. The place was a cavern rather than a room. It stank with carrion remnants into whose nature Anselme did not inquire too closely. The ground was littered with bones, broken stems and leaves of plants, and shattered or rusted vessels of alchemic use. A verdigris-eaten kettle hung from a tripod above ashes and ends of charred faggots. Rain-sodden grimoires lay mouldering in rusty metal covers. The three legged ruin of a table was propped against the wall. It was covered with a medley of oddments, among which Anselme discerned a purple vial resembling the one given him by Sephora.

In one corner was a litter of dead grass. The strong, rank odor of a wild beast mingled with the carrion stench.

Anselme looked about and listened cautiously. Then, without delay, he substituted Sephora’s vial for the one on Malachie’s table. The stolen vial he placed under his jerkin.

There was a padding of feet at the cavern's entrance. Anselme turned — to confront the black wolf. The beast came toward him, crouching tensely as if about to spring, with eyes glaring like crimson coals of Avernus. Anselme's fingers dropped to the hilt of the enchanted sword that Sephora had given him.

The wolf's eyes followed his fingers. It seemed that he recognized the sword. He turned from Anselme, and began to chew some roots of the garlic-like plant, which he had doubtless collected to make possible those operations which he could hardly have carried on in wolfish form.

This time, the transformation was not complete. The head, and body of Malachie du Marais rose up again before Anselme; but the legs were the hind legs of a monstrous wolf. He was like some bestial hybrid of antique legend.

'Your visit honors me,' he said, half snarling, with suspicion in his eyes, and voice. 'Few have cared to enter my poor abode, and I am grateful to you. In recognition of your kindness, I shall make you a present.'

With the padding movements of a wolf, he went over to the ruinous table and groped amid the confused oddments with which it was covered. He drew out an oblong silver mirror, brightly burnished, with jeweled handle, such as a great lady or damsel might own. This he offered to Anselme.

'I give you the mirror of Reality,' he announced. 'In it, all things are reflected according to their true nature. The illusions of enchantment cannot deceive it. You disbelieved me, when I warned you against Sephora. But if you hold this mirror to her face and observe the reflection, you will see that her beauty, like everything else in Sylaire, is a hollow lie — the mask of ancient horror and corruption. If you doubt me, hold the mirror to my face — now: for I, too, am part of the land's immemorial evil.'

Anselme took the silver oblong and obeyed Malachie's injunction. A moment, and his nerveless fingers almost dropped the mirror. He had seen reflected within it a face that the sepulchre should have hidden long ago -

The horror of that sight had shaken him so deeply that he could not afterwards recall the circumstances of his departure from the werewolf's lair. He had kept the werewolf's gift; but more than once he had been prompted to throw it away. He tried to tell himself that what he had seen was merely the result of some wizard trick. He refused to believe that any mirror would reveal Sephora as anything but the young and lovely sweetheart whose kisses were still warm on his lips.

All such matters, however, were driven from Anselme's mind by the situation that he found when he re-entered the tower hall. Three visitors had arrived during his absence. They stood fronting Sephora, who, with a tranquil smile on her lips, was apparently trying to explain something to them. Anselme recognized the visitors with much amazement, not untouched with consternation.

One of them was Dorothée des Flèches, clad in a trim traveling habit. The others were two serving men of her father, armed with longbows, quivers of arrows, broadswords and daggers. In spite of this array of weapons, they did not look any too comfortable or at home. But Dorothée seemed to have retained her usual matter-of-fact assurance.

'What are you doing in this queer place, Anselme?' she cried. 'And who is this woman, this chatelaine of Sylaire, as she calls herself?'

Anselme felt that she would hardly understand any answer that he could give to either query. He looked at Sephora, then back at Dorothée. Sephora was the essence of all the beauty and romance that he had ever craved. How could he have fancied himself in love with Dorothée, how could he have spent thirteen months in a hermitage because of her coldness and

changeability? She was pretty enough, with the common bodily charms of youth. But she was stupid, wanting in imagination — prosy already in the flush of her girlhood as a middle-aged housewife. Small wonder that she had failed to understand him.

What brings you here?’ he countered. ‘I had not thought to see you again.’

‘I missed you, Anselme,’ she sighed. ‘People said that you had left the world because of your love for me, and had become a hermit. At last I came to seek you. But you had disappeared. Some hunters had seen you pass yesterday with a strange woman, across the moor of Druid stones. They said you had both vanished beyond the cromlech, fading as if in air. Today I followed you with my father’s serving men. We found ourselves in this strange region, of which no one has ever heard. And now this woman—’

The sentence was interrupted by a mad howling that filled the room with eldritch echoes. The black wolf, with jaws foaming and slavering, broke in through the door that had been opened to admit Sephora’s visitors. Dorothee des Fleches began to scream as he dashed straight toward her, seeming to single her out for the first victim of his rabid fury.

Something, it was plain, had maddened him. Perhaps the water of the werewolf pool, substituted for the antidote, had served to redouble the original curse of lycanthropy.

The two serving men, bristling with their arsenal of weapons, stood like effigies. Anselme drew the sword given him by the enchantress, and leaped forward between Dorothee and the wolf. He raised his weapon, which was straightbladed, and suitable for stabbing. The mad werewolf sprang as if hurled from a catapult, and his red, open gorge was spitted on the out-thrust point. Anselme’s hand was jarred on the sword-hilt, and the shock drove him backward. The wolf fell thrashing at Anselme’s feet. His jaws had

clenched on the blade. The point protruded beyond the stiff bristles of his neck.

Anselme tugged vainly at the sword. Then the black-furred body ceased to thrash — and the blade came easily. It had been withdrawn from the sagging mouth of the dead ancient sorcerer, Malachie du Marais, which lay before Anselme on the flagstones. The sorcerer's face was now the face that Anselme had seen in the mirror, when he held it up at Malachie's injunction.

‘You have saved me! How wonderful!’ cried Dorothée.

Anselme saw that she had started toward him with out-thrust arms. A moment more, and the situation would become embarrassing.

He recalled the mirror, which he had kept under his jerkin, together with the vial stolen from Malachie du Marais. What, he wondered, would Dorothée see in its burnished depths?

He drew the mirror forth swiftly and held it to her face as she advanced upon him. What she beheld in the mirror he never knew but the effect was startling. Dorothée gasped, and her eyes dilated in manifest horror. Then, covering her eyes with her hands, as if to shut out some ghastly vision, she ran shrieking from the hall. The serving men followed her. The celerity of their movements made it plain that they were not sorry to leave this dubious lair of wizards and witches.

Sephora began to laugh softly. Anselme found himself chuckling. For awhile they abandoned themselves to uproarious mirth. Then Sephora sobered.

‘I know why Malachie gave you the mirror,’ she said. ‘Do you not wish to see my reflection in it?’

Anselme realized that he still held the mirror in his hand. Without answering Sephora, he went over to the nearest window, which looked

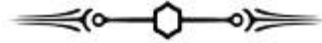
down on a deep pit lined with bushes, that had been part of an ancient, half-filled moat. He hurled the silver oblong into the pit.

‘I am content with what my eyes tell me, without the aid of any mirror,’ he declared. ‘Now let us pass to other matters which have been interrupted too long.’

Again the clinging deliciousness of Sephora was in his arms, and her fruit-soft mouth was crushed beneath his hungry lips.

The strongest of all enchantments held them in its golden circle.

The Dweller in the Gulf



SWELLING AND TOWERING swiftly, like a genie loosed from one of Solomon's bottles, the cloud rose on the planet's rim. A rusty and colossal column, it strode above the dead plain, through a sky that was dark as the brine of desert seas that have ebbed down to desert pools.

"Looks like a blithering sandstorm," commented Maspic.

"It can't very well be anything else," agreed Bellman rather curtly. "Any other kind of storm is unheard of in these regions. It's the sort of hell-twister that the Aihais call the *zoorth* — and it's coming our way, too. I move that we start looking for shelter. I've been caught in the *zoorth* before, and I don't recommend a lungful of that ferruginous dust."

"There's a cave in the old river bank, to the right," said Chivers, the third member of the party, who had been searching the desert with restless, falconlike eyes.

The trio of earthmen, hard-bitten adventurers who disdained the services of Martian guides, had started five days before from the outpost of Ahoom, into the uninhabited region called the Chaur. Here, in the beds of great rivers that had not flowed for cycles, it was rumored that the pale, platinum-like gold of Mars could be found lying in heaps, like so much salt. If fortune were propitious, their years of somewhat unwilling exile on the red planet would soon be at an end. They had been warned against the Chaur, and had heard some queer tales in Ahoom regarding the reasons why former prospectors had not returned. But danger, no matter how dire or exotic, was

merely a part of their daily routine. With a fair chance of unlimited gold at the journey's end they would have gone down through Hinnom.

Their food-supplies and water-barrels were carried on the backs of three of those curious mammals called *vortlups*, which, with their elongated legs and necks, and horny-plated bodies, might seemingly have been some fabulous combination of llama and saurian. These animals, though extravagantly ugly, were tame and obedient, and were well adapted to desert travel, being able to go without water for months at a time.

For the past two days they had followed the mile-wide course of a nameless ancient river, winding among hills that had dwindled to mere hummocks through aeons of exfoliation. They had found nothing but worn boulders, pebbles and fine rusty sand. Heretofore the sky had been silent and stirless; and nothing moved on the river-bottom, whose stones were bare even of dead lichen. The malignant column of the *zoorth*, twisting and swelling toward them, was the first sign of animation they had discerned in that lifeless land.

Prodding their *vortlups* with the iron-pointed goads which alone could elicit any increase of speed from these sluggish monsters, the earthmen started off toward the cavern-mouth descried by Chivers. It was perhaps a third of a mile distant, and was high up in the shelving shore.

The *zoorth* had blotted out the sun ere they reached the bottom of the ancient slope, and they moved through a sinister twilight that was colored like dried blood. The *vortlups*, protesting with unearthly bellows, began to climb the beach, which was marked off in a series of more or less regular steps that indicated the slow recession of its olden waters. The column of sand, rising and whirling formidably, had reached the opposite bank when they came to the cavern.

This cavern was in the face of a low cliff of iron-veined rock. The entrance had crumbled down in heaps of ferro-oxide and dark basaltic dust, but was large enough to admit with ease the earthmen and their laden beasts of burden. Darkness, heavy as if with a weaving of black webs, clogged the interior. They could form no idea of the cave's dimensions till Bellman got out an electric torch from his bale of belongings and turned its prying beam into the shadows.

The torch served merely to reveal the beginnings of a chamber of indeterminate size that ran backward into night, widening gradually, with a floor that was worn smooth as if by vanished waters.

The opening had grown dark with the onset of the *zoorth*. A weird moaning as of baffled demons filled the ears of the explorers, and particles of atomlike sand were blown in upon them, stinging their hands and faces like powdered adamant.

"The storm will last for half an hour, at least," said Bellman. "Shall we go on into the cave? Probably we won't find anything of much interest or value. But the exploration will serve to kill time. And we might happen on a few violet rubies or amber-yellow sapphires, such as are sometimes discovered in these desert caverns. You two had better bring along your torches also, and flash them on the walls and ground as we go."

His companions thought the suggestion worth following. The *vortlups*, wholly insensible to the blowing sand in their scaly mail, were left behind near the entrance. Chivers, Bellman and Maspic, with their torch-beams tearing a clotted gloom that had perhaps never known the intrusion of light in all its former cycles, went on into the widening cave.

The place was bare, with the death-like emptiness of some long-deserted catacomb. Its rusted floor and walls returned no gleam or sparkle to the playing lights. It sloped downward at an easy gradient and the sides were

water-marked at a height of six or seven feet. No doubt it had been in earlier aeons the channel of an underground offshoot from the river. It had been swept clean of all detritus, and was like the interior of some Cyclopean conduit that might give upon a sub-Martian Erebus.

None of the three adventurers was overly imaginative or prone to nervousness. But all were beset by certain odd impressions. Behind the arras of cryptic silence, time and again they seemed to hear a faint whisper, like the sigh of sunken seas far down at some hemispheric depth. The air was tinged with a slight and doubtful dankness, and they felt the stirring of an almost imperceptible draft upon their faces. Oddest of all was the hint of a nameless odor, reminding them both of animal dens and the peculiar smell of Martian dwellings.

“Do you suppose well encounter any kind of life?” said Maspic, sniffing the air dubiously.

“Not likely.” Bellman dismissed the query with his usual curtness. “Even the wild *vorthups* avoid the Chaur.”

“But there’s certainly a touch of dampness in the air,” persisted Maspic. “That means water, somewhere; and if there is water, there may be life also — perhaps of a dangerous kind.”

“We’ve got our revolvers,” said Bellman. “But I doubt if we’ll need them — as long as we don’t meet any rival gold-hunters from the Earth,” he added cynically.

“Listen.” The semi-whisper came from Chivers. “Do you fellows hear anything?”

All three had paused. Somewhere in the gloom ahead, they heard a prolonged, equivocal noise that baffled the ear with incongruous elements. It was a sharp rustling and rattling as of metal dragged over rock, and also it

was somehow like the smacking of myriad wet, enormous mouths. Anon it receded and died out at a level that was seemingly far below.

“That’s queer.” Bellman seemed to make a reluctant admission.

“What is it?” queried Chivers. “One of the millipedal underground monsters, half a mile long, that the Martians tell about?”

“You’ve been hearing too many native fairy-tales,” reproved Bellman. “No terrestrial has ever seen anything of that kind. Many deep-lying caverns on Mars have been thoroughly explored: but those in desert regions, such as the Chaur, were devoid of life. I can’t imagine what could have made that noise; but, in the interests of science, I’d like to go on and find out.”

“I’m beginning to feel creepy,” said Maspic. “But I’m game if you others are.”

Without further argument or comment, the three continued their advance into the cave. They had been walking at a fair gait for fifteen minutes, and were now at least half a mile from the entrance. The floor was steepening as if it had been the bed of a torrent. Also, the conformation of the walls had changed: on either hand there were high shelves of metallic stone and columnated recesses which the flashed rays of the torches could not always fathom.

The air had grown heavier, the dampness unmistakable. There was a breath of stagnant ancient waters. That other smell, as of wild beasts and Aihai dwellings, also tainted the gloom with its clinging fetor.

Bellman was leading the way. Suddenly his torch revealed the verge of a precipice, where the olden channel ended sheerly and the shelves and walls pitched away on each side into incalculable space. Going to the very edge, he dipped his pencil of light adown the abyss, disclosing only the vertical cliff that fell at his feet into darkness with no apparent bottom. The beam

also failed to reach the further shore of the gulf, which might have been many leagues in extent.

“Looks as if we had found the original jumping-off place,” observed Chivers. Looking about, he secured a loose lump of rock the size of a small boulder, which he hurled as far out as he could into the abysm. The earthmen listened for the sound of its fall; but several minutes went by, and there was no echo from the black profound.

Bellman started to examine the broken-off ledges on either side of the channel’s terminus. To the right he discerned a downward-sloping shelf that skirted the abyss, running for an uncertain distance. Its beginning was little higher than the channel-bed, and was readily accessible by means of a stair-like formation. The shelf was two yards wide and its gentle inclination, its remarkable evenness and regularity conveyed the idea of an ancient road hewn in the face of the cliff. It was overhung by the wall, as if by the sharply sundered half of a high arcade.

“There’s our road to Hades,” said Bellman. “And the downgrade is easy enough at that.”

“What’s the use of going further?” said Maspic. “I, for one, have had enough darkness already. And if we were to find anything by going on, it would be valueless — or unpleasant.”

Bellman hesitated. “Maybe you’re right. But I’d like to follow that ledge far enough to get some idea of the magnitude of the gulf. You and Chivers can wait here, if you’re afraid.”

Chivers and Maspic, apparently, were unwilling to avow whatever trepidation they might have felt. They followed Bellman along the shelf, hugging the inner wall. Bellman, however, strode carelessly on the verge, often flashing his torch into the vastitude that engulfed its feeble beam.

More and more, through its uniform breadth, inclination and smoothness, and the demi-arch of cliff above, the shelf impressed the earthmen as being an artificial road. But who could have made and used it? In what forgotten ages and for what enigmatic purpose had it been designed? The imagination of the terrestrials failed before the stupendous gulfs of Martian antiquity that yawned in such tenebrous queries.

Bellman thought that the wall curved inward upon itself by slow degrees. No doubt they would round the entire abyss in time by following the road. Perhaps it wound in a slow, tremendous spiral, ever downward, about and about, to the very bowels of Mars.

He and the others were awed into lengthening intervals of silence. They were horribly startled, when, as they went on, they heard in the depths beneath the same peculiar long-drawn sound or combination of sounds which they had heard in the outer cavern. It suggested other images now: the rustling was a file-like scraping; the soft, methodical, myriad smacking was vaguely similar to the noise made by some enormous creature that withdraws its feet from a quagmire.

The sound was inexplicable, terrifying. Part of its terror lay in an implication of *remoteness*, which appeared to signalize the enormity of its cause, and to emphasize the profundity of the abysm. Heard in that planetary pit beneath a lifeless desert it astonished — and shocked. Even Bellman, intrepid heretofore, began to succumb to the formless horror that rose up like an emanation from the night.

The noise grew fainter and ceased at length, giving somehow the idea that its maker had gone directly down on the perpendicular wall into nether reaches of the gulf.

“Shall we go back?” inquired Chivers.

“We might as well ,” assented Bellman without demur. “It would take all eternity to explore this place anyway.”

They started to retrace their way along the ledge. All three, with that extra-tactile sense which warns of the approach of hidden danger, were now troubled and alert. Though the gulf had grown silent once more with that withdrawal of the strange noise, they somehow felt that they were not alone. Whence the peril would come, or in what shape, they could not surmise; but they felt an alarm that was almost panic. Tacitly, none of them mentioned it; nor did they discuss the eerie mystery on which they had stumbled in a manner so fortuitous.

Maspic was a little ahead of the others now. They had covered at least half of the distance to the old cavern-channel, when his torch, playing for twenty feet ahead on the path, illumined an array of whitish figures, three abreast, that blocked the way. The flashlights of Bellman and Chivers, coming close behind, brought out with hideous clearness the vanward limbs and faces of the throng, but could not determine its number.

The creatures, who stood perfectly motionless and silent, as if awaiting the earthmen, were generically similar to the Aihais or Martian natives. They seemed however, to represent an extremely degraded and aberrant type, and the fungus-like pallor of their bodies denoted many ages of underground life. They were smaller too, than full-grown Aihais, being, on the average, about five feet tall. They possessed the enormous open nostrils, the flaring ears, the barrel chests and lanky limbs of the Martians — but all of them were eyeless. In the faces of some, there were faint, rudimentary slits where the eyes should have been; in the faces of others, there were deep and empty orbits that suggested a removal of the eyeballs.

“Lord! what a ghastly crew!” cried Maspic. “Where do they come from? and what do they want?”

“Can’t imagine,” said Bellman. “But our situation is somewhat ticklish — unless they are friendly. They must have been hiding on the shelves in the cavern above when we entered.”

Stepping boldly forward, ahead of Maspic, he addressed the creatures in the guttural Aihai tongue, many of whose vocables are scarcely to be articulated by an earthman. Some of the people stirred uneasily, and emitted shrill, cheeping sounds that bore little likeness to the Martian language. It was plain that they could not understand Bellman. Sign-language, by reason of their blindness, would have been equally useless.

Bellman drew his revolver, enjoining the others to follow suit. “We’ve got to get through them somehow,” he said “And if they won’t let us pass without interference—” the click of a cocked hammer served to finish the sentence.

As if the metallic sound had been an awaited signal the press of blind white beings sprang into sudden motion and surged forward upon the terrestrials. It was like the onset of automatons — an irresistible striding of machines, concerted and methodical, beneath the direction of a hidden power.

Bellman pulled his trigger, once, twice, thrice, at a point-blank range. It was impossible to miss; but the bullets were futile as pebbles flung at the spate of an onrushing torrent. The eyeless beings did not waver, though two of them began to bleed the yellowish-red fluid that serves the Martians for blood. The foremost of them, unwounded, and moving with diabolical sureness, caught Bellman’s arm with long, four-jointed fingers, and jerked the revolver from his grasp before he could press the trigger again. Curiously enough, the creature did not try to deprive him of his torch, which he now carried in his left hand; and he saw the steely flash of the Colt, as it hurtled down into darkness and space from the hand of the

Martian. Then the fungus-white bodies, milling horribly on the narrow road, were all about him, pressing so closely that there was no room for effectual resistance.

Chivers and Maspic, after firing a few shots, were also deprived of their weapons, but, through an uncanny discrimination, were permitted to retain their flashlights.

The entire episode had been a matter of moments. There was only a brief slackening of the onward motion of the throng, two of whose members had been shot down by Chivers and Maspic and then hurled expeditiously into the gulf by their fellows. The foremost ranks, opening deftly, included the earthmen and forced them to turn backward. Then, tightly caught in a moving vice of bodies, they were borne resistlessly along. Handicapped by the fear of dropping their torches, they could do nothing against the nightmare torrent. Rushing with dreadful strides on a path that led ever deeper into the abyss, and able to see only the lit backs and members of the creatures before them, they became a part of that eyeless and cryptic army.

Behind them, there seemed to be scores of the Martians, driving them on implacably. After awhile, their plight began to paralyze their faculties. It seemed that they moved no longer with human steps, but with the swift and automatic stalking of the clammy things that pressed about them. Thought, volition, even terror, were numbed by the unearthly rhythm of those abyssward-beating feet. Constrained by this, and by a sense of utter unreality, they spoke only at long intervals, and then in monosyllables that appeared to have lost all proper meaning, like the speech of machines. The blind people were wholly silent — there was no sound, except that of a myriad, eternal padding on the stone.

On, on they went, through ebon hours that belonged to no diurnal period. Slowly, tortuously, the road curved inward, as if it were coiled about the

interior of a blind and cosmic Babel. The earthmen felt that they must have circled the abyss many times in that terrific spiral; but the distance they had gone, and the actual extent of the stupefying gulf, were inconceivable.

Except for their torches, the night was absolute, unchangeable. It was older than the sun, it had brooded there through all past aeons. It accumulated above them like a monstrous burden; it yawned frightfully beneath. From it, the strengthening stench of stagnant waters rose. But still there was no sound other than the soft and measured thud of marching feet that descended into a bottomless Abaddon.

Somewhere, as if after the lapse of nocturnal ages, the pitward rushing had ceased. Bellman, Chivers and Maspic felt the pressure of crowded bodies relax; felt that they were standing still, while their brains continued to beat the unhuman measure of that terrible descent

Reason — and horror — returned to them slowly. Bellman lifted his flashlight, and the circling ray recovered the throng of Martians, many of whom were dispersing in a huge cavern where the gulf-circling road had now ended. Others of the beings remained, however, as if to keep guard over the earthmen. They quivered alertly at Bellman's movements as if aware of them through an unknown sense.

Close at hand, on the right, the level floor ended abruptly, and stepping to the verge, Bellman saw that the cavern was an open chamber in the perpendicular wall. Far, far below in the blackness, a phosphorescent glimmer played to and fro, like noctilucae on an underworld ocean. A slow, fetid wind blew upon him; and he heard the weird sighing of waters about the sunken cliffs: waters that had ebbed through untold cycles, during the planet's dessication.

He turned giddily away. His companions were examining the cave's interior. It seemed that the place was of artificial origin; for, darting here

and there, the torch-beams brought out enormous columnations lined with deeply graven bas-reliefs. Who had carved them or when, were problems no less insoluble than the origin of the cliff-hewn road. Their details were obscene as the visions of madness, they shocked the eye like a violent blow, conveying an extra-human evil, a bottomless malignity, in the passing moment of disclosure.

The cave was indeed of stupendous extent, running far back in the cliff, and with numerous exits, giving, no doubt, on further ramifications. The beams of the flashlights half dislodged the flapping shadows of shelved recesses; caught the salients of far walls that climbed and beetled into inaccessible gloom; played on the creatures that went to and fro like monstrous living fungi; gave to a brief visual existence the pale and polyp-like plants that clung noisomely to the nighted stone.

The place was overpowering, it oppressed the senses, crushed the brain. The very stone was like an embodiment of darkness; and light and vision were ephemeral intruders in this demesne of the blind. Somehow, the earthmen were weighed down by a conviction that escape was impossible. A strange lethargy claimed them. They did not even discuss their situation, but stood listless and silent.

Anon, from the filthy gloom, a number of the Martians reappeared. With the same suggestion of controlled automatism that had marked all their actions, they gathered about the men once more, and urged them into the yawning cavern.

Step by step, the three were borne along in that weird and leprous procession. The obscene columns multiplied, the cave deepened before them with endless vistas, like a revelation of foul things that drowse at the nadir of night. Faintly at first, but more strongly as they went on, there came to them an insidious feeling of somnolence, such as might have been

caused by mephitical effluvia. They rebelled against it, for the drowsiness was somehow dark and evil. It grew heavier upon them — and then they came to the core of the horror.

Between the thick and seemingly topless pillars, the floor ascended in an altar of seven oblique and pyramidal tiers. On the top, there squatted an image of pale metal: a thing no larger than a hare, but monstrous beyond all imagining.

The Martians crowded about the earthmen. One of them took Bellman by the arm, as if urging him to climb the altar. With the slow steps of a dreamer, he mounted the sloping tiers, and Chivers and Maspic followed.

The image resembled nothing they had ever seen on the red planet — or elsewhere. It was carven of whitish gold, and it represented a humped animal with a smooth and overhanging carapace from beneath which its head and members issued in tortoise fashion. The head was venomously flat, triangular — and eyeless. From the drooping corners of the cruelly slitted mouth, two long proboscides curved upward, hollow and cuplike at the ends. The thing was furnished with a series of short legs, issuing at uniform intervals from under the carapace, and a curious double tail was coiled and braided beneath its crouching body. The feet were round, and had the shape of small, inverted goblets.

Unclean and bestial as a figment of some atavistic madness, the eidolon seemed to drowse on the altar. It troubled the mind with a slow, insidious horror, it assailed the senses with an emanating stupor, an effluence as of primal worlds before the creation of light, where life might teem and raven slothfully in the blind ooze.

Dimly the earthmen saw that the altar swarmed with the blind Martians, who were crowding past them about the image. As if in some fantastic ritual of touch, these creatures were fondling the eidolon with their lank fingers,

were tracing its loathsome outlines. Upon their brutal faces a narcotic ecstasy was imprinted. Compelled like sleepers in some abhorrent dream, Bellman, Chivers and Maspic followed their example.

The thing was cold to the touch, and clammy as if it had lain recently in a bed of slime. But it seemed to live, to throb and swell under their fingertips. From it, in heavy, ceaseless waves, a dark vibration surged: an opiate power that clouded the eyes; that poured its baleful slumber into the blood.

With senses that swam in a strange darkness, they were vaguely aware of the pressure of thronging bodies that displaced them at the altar-summit. Anon, certain of these, recoiling as if satiate with the drug-like effluence, bore them along the oblique tiers to the cavern-floor. Still retaining their torches in nerveless fingers, they saw that the place teemed with the white people, who had gathered for that unholy ceremony. Through blackening blurs of shadow, the men watched them as they seethed up and down on the pyramid like a leprous, living frieze.

Chivers and Maspic, yielding first to the influence, slid to the floor in utter sopor. But Bellman, more resistant, seemed to fall and drift through a world of lightless dreams. His sensations were anomalous, unfamiliar to the last degree. Everywhere there was a brooding, *palpable* Power for which he could find no visual image: a Power that exhaled a miasmal slumber. In those dreams, by insensible graduations, forgetting the last glimmer of his human self, he somehow identified himself with the eyeless people; he lived and moved as they, in profound caverns, on nighted roads. And yet he was something else: an Entity without name that ruled over the blind and was worshipped by them; a thing that dwelt in the ancient putrescent waters, in the nether deep, and came forth at intervals to raven unspeakably. In that duality of being, he sated himself at blind feasts — and was also devoured. With all this, like a third element of identity, the eidolon was associated: but

only a tactile sense, and not as an optic memory. There was no light anywhere — and not even the recollection of light.

Whether he passed from these obscure nightmares into dreamless slumber, he could not know. His awakening, dark and lethargic, was like a continuation of the dreams at first. Then, opening his sodden lids, he saw the shaft of light that lay on the floor from his fallen torch. The light poured against something that he could not recognize in his drugged awareness. Yet it troubled him, and a dawning horror touched his faculties into life.

By degrees, it came to him that the thing he saw was the half-eaten body of one of the eyeless troglodytes. Some of the members were missing; and the remainder was gnawed even to the curiously articulated bones.

Bellman rose unsteadily and looked about with eyes that still held a web-like blurring of shadow. Chivers and Maspic lay beside him in heavy stupor; and along the cavern and upon the seven-tiered altar were sprawled the devotees of the somnific image.

His other senses began to awake from their lethargy, and he thought that he heard a noise that was somehow familiar: a sharp slithering, together with a measured sucking. The sound withdrew among the massy pillars, beyond the sleeping bodies. A smell as of rotten water tinged the air, and he saw that there were many curious rings of wetness on the stone, such as might be made by the rims of inverted cups. Preserving the order of footprints, they led away from the half-devoured Martian, into the shadows of that outer cave which verged upon the abyss; the direction in which the queer noise had passed, sinking now to inaudibility.

In Bellman's mind a mad terror rose and struggled with the spell that still benumbed him. He stooped down above Maspic and Chivers, and shook them roughly in turn, till they opened their eyes and began to protest with drowsy murmurs.

“Get up, damn you,” he admonished them. “If we’re ever to escape from this hell-hole, now’s the time.”

By dint of many oaths and objurgations and much muscular effort, he succeeded in getting his companions to their feet. Lurching drunkenly, they followed Bellman among the sprawled Martians, away from the pyramid on which the eidolon of white gold still brooded in malign somnolence above its worshippers.

A clouding heaviness hung upon Bellman; but somehow there was a relaxation of the opiate spell. He felt a revival of volition and a great desire to escape from the gulf and from all that dwelt in its darkness. The others, more deeply enslaved by the drowsy power, accepted his leadership and guidance in a numb, brute-like fashion.

He felt sure that he could retrace the route by which they had approached the altar. This, it seemed, was also the course that had been taken by the maker of the ring-like marks of fetid wetness. Wandering on amid the repugnantly carved columns for what seemed an enormous distance, they came at last to the sheer verge, that portice of the black Tartarus, from which they could look down on its ultimate gulf. Far beneath, on those putrefying waters, the phosphorescence ran in widening circles, as if troubled by the plunge of a heavy body. To the very edge, at their feet, the watery rings were imprinted on the rock.

They turned away, Bellman, shuddering with half-memories of his blind dreams, and the terror of his awakening, found at the cave’s corner the beginning of that upward road which skirted the abyss: the road that would take them back to the lost sun.

At his injunction, Maspic and Chivers turned off their flashlights to conserve the batteries. It was doubtful how much longer these would last

and light was their prime necessity. His own torch would serve for the three till it became exhausted.

There was no sound or stirring of life from that cave of lightless sleep where the Martians lay about the narcotizing image. But a fear such as he had never felt in all his adventurings caused Bellman to sicken and turn faint as he listened at its threshold.

The gulf, too, was silent; and the circles of phosphor had ceased to widen on the waters. Yet somehow the silence was a thing that clogged the senses, retarded the limbs. It rose up around Bellman like the clutching slime of some nethermost pit, in which he must drown. With dragging effort he began the ascent, hauling, cursing and kicking his companions till they responded like drowsy animals.

It was a climb through Limbo, an ascent from nadir through darkness that seemed palpable and viscid. On and up they toiled, along the monotonous, imperceptibly winding grade where all measure of distance was lost, and time was meted only by the repetition of eternal steps. The night lowered before Bellman's feeble shaft of light; it closed behind like an all-engulfing sea, relentless and patient; biding its time till the torch should go out.

Looking over the verge at intervals, Bellman saw the gradual fading of the phosphorescence in the depths. Fantastic images rose in his mind, it was like the last glimmering of hell-fire in some extinct inferno; like the drowning of nebulae in voids beneath the universe. He felt the giddiness of one who looks down upon infinite space... Anon there was only blackness; and he knew by this token the awful distance they had climbed.

The minor urges of hunger, thirst, fatigue, had been trod under by the fear that impelled him. From Maspic and Chivers, very slowly, the clogging stupor lifted, and they too were conscious of an adumbration of terror vast

as the night itself. The blows and kicks and objurgations of Bellman were no longer needed to drive them on.

Evil, ancient, soporous, the night hung about them. It was like the thick and fetid fur of bats: a material thing that choked the lungs, that deadened all the senses. It was silent as the slumber of dead worlds... But out of that silence, after the lapse of apparent years, a twofold and familiar sound arose and overtook the fugitives: the sound of something that slithered over stone far down in the abyss: the sucking noise of a creature that withdrew its feet as if from a quagmire. Inexplicable, and arousing mad, incongruous ideas, like a sound heard in delirium, it quickened the earthmen's terror into sudden frenzy.

"God! what is it?" breathed Bellman. He seemed to remember sightless things, abhorrent, *palpable* shapes of primal night, that were no legitimate part of human recollection. His dreams and his nightmare awakening in the cave — the white eidolon — the half-eaten troglodyte of the nether cliffs — the rings of wetness, leading toward the gulf — all returned like the figments of a teeming madness, all to assail him on that terrible road midway between the underworld sea and the surface of Mars.

His question was answered only by a continuation of the noise. It seemed to grow louder — to ascend the wall beneath. Maspic and Chivers, snapping on their lights, began to run with frantic leaps; and Bellman, losing his last remnant of control, followed suit.

It was a race with unknown horror. Above the labored beating of their hearts, the measured thudding of their feet, the men still heard that sinister, unaccountable sound. They seemed to race on through leagues of blackness; and yet the noise drew nearer, climbing below them, as if its maker were a thing that walked on the sheer cliff.

Now the sound was appallingly close — and a little ahead. It ceased abruptly. The running lights of Maspic and Chivers, who moved abreast, discovered the crouching thing that filled the two-yard shelf from side to side.

Hardened adventurers though they were the men would have shrieked aloud with hysteria, or would have hurled themselves from the precipice, if the sight had not induced a kind of catalepsy. It was as if the pale idol of the pyramid, swollen to mammoth proportions, and loathsomely *alive*, had come up from the abyss and was squatting before them!

Here, plainly, was the creature that had served as a model for that atrocious image. The humped, enormous carapace, vaguely recalling the armor of the glyptodon, shone with a luster as of wet white gold. The eyeless head, alert but somnolent, was thrust forward on a neck that arched obscenely. A dozen or more of short legs, with goblet-shapen feet, protruded slantwise beneath the overhanging shell. The two proboscides, yard-long, with cupped ends, arose from the corners of the cruelly slitted mouth and waved slowly in air toward the earthmen.

The thing, it seemed, was old as that dying planet, an unknown form of primal life that had dwelt always in the caverned waters. Before it, the faculties of the earthmen were drugged by an evil stupor, such as they had felt before the eidolon. They stood with their flashlights playing full on the Terror; and they could not move nor cry out when it reared suddenly erect, revealing its ridged belly and the queer double tail that slithered and rustled metallically on the rock. Its numerous feet, beheld in this posture, were hollow and chalice-like, and they oozed with mephitic wetness. No doubt they served for suction-pads, enabling it to walk on a perpendicular surface.

Inconceivably swift and sure in all its motions, with short strides on its hindmost legs, levered by the tail, the monster came forward on the helpless

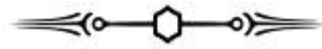
men. Unerringly the two proboscides curved over, and their ends came down on Chivers' eyes as he stood with lifted face. They rested there, covering the entire sockets — for a moment only. Then there was an agonizing scream, as the hollow tips were withdrawn with a sweeping movement lithe and vigorous as the lashing of serpents.

Chivers swayed slowly, nodding his head, and twisting about in half-narcotised pain. Maspic, standing at his side, saw in a dull and dream-like manner the gaping orbits from which the eyes were gone. It was the last thing that he ever saw. At that instant the monster turned from Chivers, and the terrible cups dripping with blood and feter, descended on Maspic's own eyes.

Bellman, who had paused close behind the others, comprehended what was occurring like one who witnesses the abominations of a nightmare but is powerless to intervene or flee. He saw the movements of the cupped members, he heard the single atrocious cry that was wrung from Chivers, and the swiftly ensuing scream of Maspic. Then, above the heads of his fellows, who still held their useless torches in rigid fingers, the proboscides came toward him...

With blood rilling heavily upon their faces, with the somnolent, vigilant, implacable and eyeless Shape at their heels, herding them on, restraining them when they tottered at the brink, the three began their second descent of the road that went down forever to a night-bound Avernus.

The Dark Age



THE LABORATORY WAS like a citadel. It stood on a steep eminence, overtopped only by the loftier mountains, and looked out across numberless fir-thick valleys and serried ridges. The morning sunlight came to it above peaks of perennial snow; and the sunsets burned beyond a rivered plain, where forest saplings had taken the battlefields of yesteryear, and skin-clad savages prowled amid the mounded ruins of sybaritic cities.

They who had built the laboratory, in the years when Earth's loftiest civilization was crumbling swiftly, had designed it for a fortress of science, in which something of man's lore and wisdom should be preserved throughout the long descent into barbaric night.

The walls were of squared boulders from a glacial moraine; and the woodwork was of mountain cedar, mightily beamed as that which was used in Solomon's temple. High above the main edifice there soared an observatory tower, from which the heavens and the surrounding lands could be watched with equal facility. The hill-top had been cleared of pine and fir. Behind the building there were sheer cliffs that forbade approach; and all around it a zone of repellent force, which could be made lethally destructive if desired, was maintained by machines that conserved the solar radiations and turned them into electricity.

The dwellers in the laboratory looked upon themselves as the priests of a sacred trust. They called themselves the Custodians. In the beginning they had numbered eight couples, men and women of the highest ability and attainment, specializing in all the main branches of science, who had withdrawn to this secluded place from a world ravaged by universal war,

famine and disease, in which all other scientists and technicians were doomed to perish. The region about the laboratory was, at that time, unpeopled; and the building, reared with utmost secrecy, escaped destruction in the warfare that wiped out whole cities and covered great empires with low-lying clouds of death.

Later, into the hills and valleys below the laboratory, there came a wretched remnant of city-dwellers from the plain. With these people, already brutalized by their sufferings and hardships, the handful of scientists held little commerce. Over a course of generations, the Custodians, intermarrying, decreased gradually in number through sterility; while the other fugitives multiplied, reverting more and more to a state of barbarism, and retaining only as a dim tribal legend the memory of the civilization from which they had fallen.

Living in mountain caves, or rude huts, hunting the forest animals with crudely made spears and bows, they lost all vestige of the high knowledge and mastery over nature possessed by their forefathers. They understood no longer the machines that rusted in the rotting cities. Through a sort of atavistic animism, they began to worship the elements that their fathers had subdued and controlled. At first they tried to assail the laboratory, impelled by a savage lust for loot and bloodshed; but, driven back with dire loss by the zone of deadly force, they soon abandoned their siege. In time they came to regard the Custodians as actual demigods, wielding mysterious, awful powers, and working incomprehensible miracles. Few of them now dared to approach the environs of the building, or to follow the wild boar and deer into the wooded valleys about it.

For many years, none of the Custodians was seen by the hill-people. Sometimes, by day, there were strange vapors that mounted to the clouds above the observatory; and at night the lofty windows burned like hill-

descended stars. The Custodians, it was thought, were forging their thunderbolts in godlike secrecy.

Then, from the dreadful house on the height there came down one morning a single Custodian. He bore no weapon but carried an armful of heavy books. Approaching a small village of the tribesmen, he raised his right hand in the universal gesture of peace.

Many of the more timid fled before him, hiding themselves in their dark huts or amid the thick forest; and the other villagers received him with superstitious fear and suspicion. Speaking a language they could hardly understand, he told them that he had come to live among them. His name was Atullos. By degrees he won their confidence; and afterwards he mated with a woman of the tribe. Like Prometheus, bringer of fire to ancient mankind, he sought to enlighten these savages; and undertook to reproduce for their benefit some of the inventions preserved in the laboratory. He told them nothing of his reasons for leaving the other Custodians, with whom he had held no communication since joining the hillpeople.

Atullos had brought with him no other equipment than his few books. For lack of even the most rudimentary tools and materials, his scientific labors were fraught with immense difficulty. The savages, in their reversion, had lost even the knowledge of metals. Their weapons were those of the Stone Age; their ploughshares crooked sticks of fire-hardened wood. Atullos was compelled to spend whole years in mining and smelting the ores that he required for his tools and machines; and he even made long, hazardous journeys to obtain a supply of certain elements lacking in that region. From one of these journeys he failed to return; and it was believed that he had been slain by the warriors of a hostile and very brutal tribe upon whose territory he had intruded in his search.

He left behind him one child, the boy Torquane, whose mother had died shortly after the child's birth. Also, as a legacy to the tribe, he left a few tools of copper and iron, in whose forging he had instructed some of the more intelligent men. The machines on which he had labored with such pain and patience were only half-completed; and following his disappearance, no one was competent to finish them. They were designed for the development of electric power, and the use and control of certain cosmic radiation; but the tribesmen who had assisted Atullos knew nothing of their purpose and the principles involved.

Atullos had meant to instruct his son Torquane in all the lore of the Custodians; and thus the elder sciences, conserved so jealously by a few might again have become in time the heritage of all mankind. Torquane had reached the age of four when Atullos vanished; and he had learned no more than the alphabet and a few simple rules of arithmetic. For lack of his father's guidance, this rudimentary knowledge was of little use to him; and, though naturally precocious and brilliant beyond his age, he could not continue for himself the education that Atullos had begun.

In the soul of Torquane, however, as he grew to manhood among primitive companions, there burned the spark of a restless aspiration, an inherited craving for knowledge, that set him apart from the others.

He remembered more of his father than most children recall when deprived of the parent at so early an age; and he learned from his fellows that Atullos had been one of the Custodians, who were looked upon by the tribe as beings with divine powers and attributes. It was commonly believed that the Custodians had banished Atullos from their midst because of his desire to help and enlighten the hill-people. Slowly, as his mind matured, there came to Torquane an understanding of the altruistic aims of his father, who had dreamt of restoring the old sciences in a darkened world.

Torquane lived the rude life of the tribesmen, hunting the hare, the boar and the deer, and climbing the precipitous crags and mountains. Excelling in all barbarous sports, he became very hardy and self-reliant. Outwardly he differed little from the other lads, except for his fairer skin and straighter features, and the dreaminess that filmed his bright eyes on occasion. As he neared his full growth, he became a leader among the youths, and was regarded with peculiar respect as the son of that Atullos who had become a sort of tutelary god for the hillmen after his death.

Often the boy visited the deep, dry cave which his father had used as a workshop. Here the tools, the half-built engines, the chemicals, books and manuscripts of Atullos were stored. Torquane examined them all with a great and growing wistfulness, trying vainly to guess the secret of the machines, and spelling painfully, letter by letter, the words in the mouldering volumes, whose meaning he could not divine. Like a man who dwells in a dark place, yearning blindly for the sun, he felt himself on the threshold of a luminous world; but light was denied him, and all his strivings ended only in deeper confusion.

Often, as he grew older, his thoughts turned to the mystery of the high and guarded citadel from which his father had come down to join the tribesmen. From certain points on the higher hills he could see its observatory towers looming darkly above the cleared eminence. His comrades, like their forefathers, shunned the neighborhood as a place of supernatural peril, where the Custodians' thunderbolts would promptly strike down the intruder. For many years no one had beheld the Custodians; the voices which, it was said, had, formerly spoken like the mountain thunder, threatening or warning the whole countryside, were no longer heard. But no man dreamt of penetrating their seclusion.

Torquane, however, knowing his kinship to the Custodians, wondered much concerning them. A strange curiosity drew him again and again to the hills below the laboratory. From such viewpoints, however, he could see nothing of the occupants or their activities. All was still and silent, and this very stillness, by degrees, emboldened the boy and drew him nearer to the dreaded eyrie.

Using all his stealth of woodcraft, and treading with utmost care lest a leaf or twig should crackle beneath him, he climbed one day the steep, heavily forested slope toward the building. Breathless with awe and apprehension, he peered at last from behind the bole of a gnarly pine that grew just beyond the verges of the laboratory grounds.

Grim, repellent, fortress-like, the rectilinear walls and square towers bulked above him against a heaven of light clouds. The windows glimmered blankly, withholding all their secrets. In the building's front an open doorway arched, beyond which, in silver flashes, Torquane discerned the leaping of fountains amid a sunlit court.

Sapling firs and pines had begun to invade the level, cleared area of the grounds. Some of them were already shoulder-high, while others rose only to a man's waist or knees, offering little obstruction to the view. Amid these miniature thickets Torquane heard a vengeful humming that might have been made by some invisible throng of bees. The sound maintained always the same position, the same pitch. Peering closely, he saw that there was a yard-wide line of bare, vacant soil running like a path amid the young conifers, and following the apparent course of the sound. This line, he knew suddenly, betokened the force-barrier beyond which no man could pass; and the humming was the noise made by the repellent, lethal power.

Much of the area between the saplings and the laboratory was filled with rows of vegetables and there was also a small flower garden. The place bore

evidence of careful tending and had been watered recently; but no one was in sight at the time. In the building itself, as Torquane stared and listened, there began a sonorous iron throbbing whose cause, in his complete ignorance of machinery, he could not imagine. Alarmed by the loudening noise, which seemed full of mysterious menace, Torquane fled on the wooded slope, and did not venture to return for many days.

Curiosity, and some emotion deeper than curiosity, whose nature and origin he could not have defined, impelled him to revisit the place in spite of his vague, half-superstitious fears and intuitions of danger.

Peering, as before, from the shelter of the ancient pines, he beheld for the first time one of the building's occupants. At a distance of no more than twenty yards from his hiding-place, a girl was stooping above the violets and pansies in the trimly plotted flower garden.

Torquane thought that he gazed upon a goddess: for, among all the village girls, there was none half so lovely and graceful as this incredible being. Clad in a gown of light April green, her hair falling in a luminous yellow cloud about her shoulders, she seemed to cast a brightness on the flowers as she moved among them.

Drawn by a strange fascination such as he had never before experienced, the boy leaned from behind the sheltering pine, forgetful of his fears, and unconscious that he was exposing himself to view. Only when the girl happened to glance toward him, and gave a low, startled cry as her eyes met his, did he realize the indiscretion into which he had been betrayed.

Torquane was torn between the impulse of flight and a strong, unreasoned attraction that made him unwilling to go. This girl, he knew, was one of the Custodians; and the Custodians were demigods who wished no intercourse with men. Yet, through his father he was able to claim kinship with these lofty beings. And the girl was so beautiful, and her eyes,

meeting his across the flower-pot were so kind and gentle in spite of their startlement, that he ceased to apprehend the instant doom that his daring might perhaps have earned. Surely, even if he remained and spoke to her, she would not loose against him the dreadful lightning of the Custodians.

Raising his hand in a gesture of placation, he stepped forward among the seedling conifers, stopping only when he neared the vicious humming of the invisible force-barrier. The girl watched him with palpable amazement, her eyes widening, and her face paling and then reddening as she grew aware of Torquane's comeliness and the undisguised ardor of his gaze. For a moment it seemed that she would turn and leave the garden. Then, as if she had conquered her hesitancy, she came a little nearer to the barrier.

"You must go away," she said, in words that differed somewhat from those of the dialect familiar to Torquane. But he understood the words and to him their strangeness savored of divinity. Without heeding the admonition, he stood like one enchanted.

"Go quickly," warned the girl, a sharper note in her voice. "It is not allowable that any barbarian should come here."

"But I am not a barbarian," said Torquane proudly. "I am the son of Atullos, the Custodian. My name is Torquane. Can we not be friends?"

The girl was plainly surprised and perturbed. At the mention of Atullos' name, a shadow darkened her eyes; and behind the shadow an obscure terror seemed to lurk.

"No, no," she insisted. "It is impossible. You must not come here again. If my father knew—"

At that instant the humming of the barrier deepened, loud and angry as the buzzing of a million wasps, and Torquane felt in his flesh an electric tingling, such as he had felt during violent thunderstorms. All at once the air was lined with sparks and bright fiery threads, and was swept by a wave of

ardent heat. Before Torquane the little pines and firs appeared to wither swiftly, and some of them leapt into sudden flame.

“Go! go!” he heard the crying of the girl, as he fell back before the moving barrier. She fled toward the laboratory, looking back over her shoulder as she went. Torquane, half blinded by the weaving webs of fire, saw that a man had appeared in the portals, as if coming to meet her. The man was old and white-bearded, and his face was stern as that of some irate deity.

Torquane knew that this being had perceived his presence. His fate would be that of the seared saplings if he lingered. Again a superstitious terror rose within him, and he ran swiftly into the sheltering gloom of the ancient forest.

Heretofore Torquane had known only the aimless longings of adolescence. He had cared little for any of the savage though often not uncomely maidens of the hill-people. Doubtless he would have chosen one of them in time; but, having seen the fair daughter of the Custodian, he thought only of her, and his heart became filled with a turmoil of passion that was all the wilder because of its overweening audacity and apparent hopelessness.

Proud and reticent by nature, he concealed this love from his companions, who wondered somewhat at his gloomy moods and the fits of idleness that alternated with feverish toil, and sport.

Sometimes he would sit for whole days in a deep study, contemplating the machines and volumes of Atullos; sometimes he would lead the younger men on the chase of some dangerous animal, risking his own life with a madder disregard than ever before. And often he would absent himself on lonely expeditions that he never explained to the others.

These expeditions were always to the region about the laboratory. For a youth of Torquane's ardor and courage, the peril of such visits became an excitant rather than a deterrent. He was careful, however, to keep himself hidden from view; and he maintained a respectful distance from the humming barrier.

Often he saw the girl as she moved about her garden labors, tending the blossoms and vegetables; and he fed his desperate longing on such glimpses, and dreamed wildly of carrying her away by force, or of making himself the master of the laboratory. He suspected, shrewdly, that the Custodians were few in number, since he had seen only the girl and the old man who was probably her father. But it did not occur to him that these were the sole tenants of the massive citadel.

It seemed to Torquane, pondering with a lover's logic, that the girl had not disliked him. She had warned him to go away, had called him a barbarian. Nevertheless he felt that she had not been offended by his presumption in accosting her. He was sure that he could win her love if given the opportunity. Mating with a daughter of the Custodians, he would win admittance to that world of light and knowledge from which his father had come; that world which had tantalized his dreams. Tirelessly he schemed and plotted, trying to devise a way in which he could pass the force-barrier, or could communicate with the girl without bringing upon himself the Custodian's anger.

Once, by moonlight, he attempted to climb the cliffs behind the laboratory, working his way hazardously from coign to coign. He abandoned the attempt only when he came to an overhanging wall of rock that was smooth as beaten metal. There came the day when Torquane, revisiting the woods that pressed close upon the laboratory garden, grew aware of an unwonted silence weighing oppressively upon all things. For a

few instants he was puzzled, failing to comprehend the cause. Then he realized that the silence was due to a cessation of that humming noise which had signalized the presence of the barrier.

The grounds were deserted, and, for the first time, the building's heavy cedar portals had been closed. Nowhere was there any sound or visual sign of human occupation.

For awhile Torquane was suspicious, apprehending a trap with the instinct of a wild creature. Knowing nothing of machinery, it did not occur to him that the repellent power had failed through the wearing out of its hidden generators. Perplexed and wondering, he waited for hours, hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl. But the garden remained empty, and no one opened the frowning portals.

Alert and vigilant, the boy still watched. The forest's afternoon shadows began to lengthen, invading the laboratory grounds. Screaming harshly, a mountain bluejay flashed from the pine above Torquane, and flew unharmed across the area that the lethal screen had formerly barred to all ingress of living things. An inquisitive squirrel raced among the saplings, over the bare path of the barrier, and chattered impudently in a plot of young corn and beans. Half incredulous, Torquane knew that the barrier was gone; but still his caution prevailed, and he went away at last.

"Varia, we cannot repair the generators," said the aged Phabar to his daughter. "The work is beyond my strength or yours. Also, metals are required which we cannot procure in their native state, and can no longer make with the weakening atomic transformers. Sooner or later the savages will learn that the force-barrier has ceased to exist. They will attack the laboratory — and will find only an old man and a girl to oppose them."

"The end draws near, for in any case I have not long to live. Alas! if there were only some younger man to assist me in my labors, and in

defending the laboratory — some worthy and well-trained youth to whose care I could leave you, and could leave our heritage of science! But I am the last of the Custodians — and soon the darkness into which mankind has fallen will be complete, and none will remember the ancient knowledge.”

“What of that boy who calls himself the son of Atullos?” ventured Varia timidly. “I am sure he is intelligent; and he would learn quickly if you were to receive him into the laboratory.”

“Never!” cried Phabar, his quavering voice grown loud and deep with an old anger. “He is a mere savage, like the rest of mankind — and moreover I would rather receive a wild beast than the progeny of the false Atullos — that Atullos whom I drove from the laboratory because of his evil passion for your mother. One would think you were enamoured of this young forest wolf. Speak not of him again.”

He glared suspiciously at the girl, the rancor of unquenched enmity and jealousy toward Atullos glowing in his sunken eyes, and then turned with palsy-shaken fingers to the test tubes and retorts among which he was still wont to busy himself in pottering experiments.

Torquane, returning the next day, verified his discovery of the barrier’s failure. He could now approach the building if he wished, without peril of being blasted from existence at the first step. Boldly he went forward into the gardens and followed a little path that led to the shut portals. Coming in plain view of the windows, he laid his bow and arrows on the ground as a token of his peaceful intent.

When he neared the portals, a man appeared on one of the high towers and trained downward a long metal tube revolving on a pivot. It was the old man he had seen before. From the tube’s mouth there leaped in swift succession a number of little shafts of silent flame that played around Torquane and blackened the soil and flower-beds wherever they struck.

Phabar's aim was uncertain, due to his aging eyesight and trembling hands, for none of the fire-bolts found its mark. Torquane went away, concluding that his overtures were still undesired by the Custodians.

As he entered the woods, he was startled by a human shape that drew back stealthily into the shadows. It was the first time he had seen anyone lurking in that century-shunned locality. In that brief glimpse, Torquane knew the man for a stranger. He wore no garment except a wolf-skin, and carried for weapon only a crude spear tipped with flint. His features were brutal and degraded, and his forehead was striped with red and yellow earths, identifying him as a member of that extremely degenerate tribe which was believed to have slain Torquane's father.

Torquane hailed the man but received no answer other than the crackling of twigs and the sound of running footsteps. He dispatched an arrow after the intruder, and lost sight of him among the tree-trunks before he could notch a second arrow to the string. Feeling that the man's presence boded no good to the Custodians or his own people, he followed for some distance, trailing the stranger easily but failing to overtake him.

Disturbed and uneasy, he returned to the village. After that, for long hours daily, and sometimes by night, he watched the hills about the laboratory, glimpsing more than once the strange tribesman together with others plainly of the same clan. These savages were very furtive, and in spite of all his woodcraft they avoided any direct encounter with Torquane. It became manifest that the laboratory was the center of their interest, since he found them lurking always somewhere in its neighborhood. From day to day their numbers increased; and Torquane soon conceived the idea that they were planning an attack upon the building. Henceforth the torments of his baffled love became mingled with fears for the safety of its object.

He had kept this love and his trips and vigils secret from his comrades. Now, calling together the young men and boys who acknowledged him as their leader, he told them all what he had experienced and observed. Some, learning that the force-barrier was dead, urged an immediate assault upon the laboratory, and promised Torquane their assistance in capturing the girl. Torquane, however, shook his head, saying:

“A deed such as this would ill become the son of Atullos. I will take no woman against her will. Rather would I have you aid me in protecting the Custodians, who are now few and feeble, against the marauding of this alien tribe.”

Torquane’s followers were no less willing to fight the intruders than to assail the laboratory. Indeed, the alien clansmen were regarded as natural foes; and their slaying of Atullos had not been forgotten. When it became generally known that they were lurking about the laboratory, many of the tribe’s older warriors pledged assistance to Torquane in repelling them; and the youth soon found himself the leader of a small army.

Scouts were sent out to watch closely the movements of the foreigners, who had grown bolder with daily re-enforcements. At midnight some of the scouts reported that they were gathering on the slope below the laboratory. Their exact number was hard to determine because of the thick forest. Some of them had been seen stripping a fallen pine of its boughs with stone axes; and it seemed plain that the attack was imminent, and that the pine would be used as a sort of battering-ram to break in the portals.

Torquane marshalled immediately his entire force, numbering close to a hundred men and boys. They were armed with copper knives or spears, well-seasoned oak or dogwood bows, and quivers filled with copper-tipped arrows. In addition to his own bow and knife, Torquane carried with much caution a small earthen jar filled with a grey powder, which he had taken

from Atullos' workshop. Years before during his boyhood, prompted by a spirit of crude experimentation, he had dropped a pinch of the powder upon a bed of coals, and had been startled by the loud explosion that resulted. After that, realizing his complete ignorance of such matters, he had feared to experiment with any more of the chemicals prepared and stored by his father. Now, recalling the powder's properties, it occurred to him that he might make an effective use of it in the battle against the invaders.

Marching with all possible speed, the little army reached in an hour the starlit height on which stood the dark laboratory. The wooded slope was apparently clear of the alien savages who had swarmed upon it earlier that night; and Torquane began to fear that they had already assaulted and taken the building. However, when he and his men emerged from the forest on the edge of the gardens, they saw that the attack had just begun. The grounds swarmed with stealthy, silent shapes, dimly discernible, who moved with a concerted surging toward the still and unlit edifice. It was as if an army of shadows had beleaguered a phantom fortress. Then the eerie silence was shattered by a loud crashing together with an outburst of ferocious howling from the savages.

Torquane and his followers, rushing forward, saw the center of the dark horde surge backward a little. They knew that the battering-ram had failed to break in the cedar portals at its first impact and was being withdrawn for a second attempt.

Torquane, running well ahead of his men, ignited with a pitchy pine brand the fuse of tinder vegetable fibre which he had prepared for the earthen jar. The fuse burned perilously close to the jar's contents ere he came within hurling distance of that savage horde. He heard another and harsher crashing, followed by wild shouts of triumph, as if the door had given way. Then the jar, flung with all his strength, exploded with a great

flash that lit the entire scene, together with a deafening detonation as of mountain thunder. Torquane, who had been prepared for some violent result, was hurled backward to the ground with stunning force; and his followers stood aghast, believing that they had witnessed the falling of a fiery bolt launched by some hidden Custodian.

A similar belief, it seemed, had been impressed even more powerfully upon the minds of the besiegers: for they fled on all sides in dire disorder. Some were speared in the darkness by Torquane's men, and the rest scattered amid the pines with frightful howls.

Thus, for the first time since the beginning of the dark era, gunpowder was used in battle.

Torquane, regaining his feet, found that the combat was already over. He advanced cautiously, and came upon the dismembered bodies of several of the invaders lying strewn about a garden plot that had been blasted and deeply pitted by the explosion. All the others, it seemed, had either escaped or been accounted for by his warriors. There was small likelihood that the savages would repeat their assault on the laboratory.

However, for the remainder of that night he and his followers kept watch about the building. Lest its inmates should mistake them for enemies, he went more than once to the portals, which had been shattered inward by the pine ram, and shouted aloud to declare his peaceful intentions. He had hoped for some sign from the girl: but in the courtyard beyond the broken door there was naught but the ghostly splashing of fountains. All the windows remained lightless; and a tomblike silence hung upon the building.

At earliest dawn, Torquane, accompanied by two of his warriors, ventured to enter the courtyard. In an angle of its opposite side, they came to an open doorway giving admission to a long empty hall illuminated dimly by a single globe of mysterious blue light. They followed the hall,

and Torquane shouted as they went but was answered only by hollow-sounding echoes. A little awed, and wondering if the silence might betoken some cunning trap, they reached the hall's end and paused on the threshold of an immense chamber.

The place was crowded with unknown, intricate machines. Tall dynamos towered to the skylighted roof; and everywhere, on wooden benches and shelves or stone-topped tables, there were huge and strangely shaped vessels, and vials and beakers filled with hueless or colored liquids. Gleaming, silent motors bulked in the corners. Apparatuses of a hundred forms, whose use the young barbarians could not imagine, littered the paved floor and were piled along the walls.

In the midst of all this paraphernalia, an old man sat before one of the vial-laden tables in a chair of cedarwood. The light of sunless morning, livid and ghastly, mingled with the glow of blue lamps on his sunken features. Beside him the girl stood, confronting the intruders with startled eyes.

"We come as friends," cried Torquane, dropping his bow on the floor.

The old Custodian, glowering with half-senile anger, made no effort to rise from his chair, but sank back as if the exertion were beyond his strength. He spoke faintly, and motioned with weak fingers to the girl, who, lifting from the table a glass filled with a water-clear liquid, held it firmly to his lips. He drank a portion of the liquid, and then, after a single convulsive shudder, he rested limply in the chair, his head lolling on his bosom and his body seeming to sag and shrivel beneath its garments.

For an instant, with dilated eyes and pallid features, the girl turned again toward Torquane. It seemed that she hesitated. Then, draining the remainder of the hueless liquid from the glass in her hand, she fell to the floor like a toppling statue.

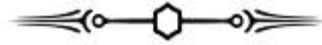
Torquane and his companions, amazed and mystified, went forward into the room. A little doubtful of the strange contrivances that surrounded them, they ventured to inspect the fallen girl and the seated ancient. It was plain that both were dead; and it dawned upon them that the water-clear liquid must have been a poison more swift and violent than any with which they were familiar: a poison that was part of the lost science of the Custodians.

Torquane, peering down at the still, inscrutable face of Varia, was filled with a blind mingling of sorrow and bafflement. It was not thus that he had dreamt of entering the guarded citadel and winning the Custodian's daughter. Never would he retrieve the mysterious lore of the Custodians or understand their machines, or read their ciphered books. It was not for him to finish the Promethean labors of Atullos, and re-illuminate the dark world with science. These things, with the girl Varia for mate and instructress, he might have done. But now, many centuries and cycles would pass, ere the lifting of the night of barbarism; and other hands than those of Torquane, or the sons of Torquane, would rekindle the lamp of ancient knowledge.

Still, though he knew it not in his sorrow and frustration, there remained other things: the clean, sweet lips of the simple hill-girl who would bear his children; the wild, free life of man, warring on equal terms with nature and maintaining her laws obediently; the sun and stars unclouded by the vapors of man's making; the air untainted by his seething cities.

The Third Episode of Vathek

THE STORY OF THE PRINCESS ZULKAÏS AND THE PRINCE KALILAH



MY FATHER, LORD, can scarcely be unknown to you, inasmuch as the Caliph Motassem had entrusted to his care the fertile province of Masre. Nor would he have been unworthy of his exalted position if, in view of man's ignorance and weakness, an inordinate desire to control the future were not to be accounted an unpardonable error.

The Emir Abou Taher Achmed, however — for such was my father's name — was very far from recognizing this truth. Only too often did he seek to forestall Providence, and to direct the course of events in spite of the decrees of Heaven. Ah! terrible indeed are those decrees! Sooner or later their accomplishment is sure! Vainly do we seek to oppose them!

During a long course of years, everything flourished under my father's rule, and among the Emirs who have successfully administered that beautiful province, Abou Taher Achmed will not be forgotten. Following his speculative bent, he enlisted the services of certain experienced Nubians, born near the sources of the Nile, who had studied the stream throughout its course, and knew all its characteristics, and the properties of its waters; and, with their aid, he carried out his impious design of regulating the overflow of the river. Thus he covered the country with a too luxuriant vegetation, which left it afterwards exhausted. The people, always slaves to outward appearances, applauded his enterprises, worked indefatigably at the unnumbered canals with which he intersected the land, and, blinded by his successes, passed lightly over any unfortunate circumstances accompanying

them. If, out of every ten ships that he sent forth to traffic, according to his fancy, a single ship came back richly freighted after a successful voyage, the wreck of the other nine was counted for nothing. Moreover, as, owing to his care and vigilance, commerce prospered under his rule, he was himself deceived as to his losses, and took to himself all the glory of his gains.

Soon Abou Taher Achmed came to be convinced that if he could recover the arts and sciences of the ancient Egyptians, his power would be unbounded. He believed that, in the remote ages of antiquity, men had appropriated to their own use some rays of the divine wisdom, and thus been enabled to work marvels, and he did not despair of bringing back once again that glorious time. For this purpose he caused search to be made, among the ruins abounding in the country, for the mysterious tablets which, according to the report of the Sages who swarmed in his court, would show how the arts and sciences in question were to be acquired, and also indicate the means of discovering hidden treasures, and subduing the Intelligences by which those treasures were guarded. Never before his time had any Mussulman puzzled his brains over hieroglyphics. Now, however, search was made, on his behalf, for hieroglyphics of every kind, in all quarters, in the remotest provinces, the strange symbols being faithfully copied on linen cloths. I have seen these cloths a thousand times, stretched out on the roofs of our palace. Nor could bees be more busy and assiduous about a bed of flowers than were the Sages about these painted sheets. But, as each Sage entertained a different opinion as to the meaning of what was there depicted, arguments were frequent, and quarrels ensued. Not only did the Sages spend the hours of daylight in prosecuting their researches, but the moon often shed its beams upon them while so occupied. They did not dare to light torches upon the terraced roofs, for fear of alarming the faithful Mussulmans, who were beginning to blame my father's veneration for an

idolatrous antiquity, and regarded all these painted symbols, these figures, with a pious horror.

Meanwhile, the Emir, who would never have thought of neglecting any real matter of business however unimportant, for the pursuit of his strange studies, was by no means so particular with regard to his religious observances, and often forgot to perform the ablutions ordained by the law. The women of his harem did not fail to perceive this, but were afraid to speak, as, for one reason and another, their influence had considerably waned. But, on a certain day, Shaban, the chief of the eunuchs, who was very old and very pious, presented himself before his master, holding a ewer and golden basin, and said: “The waters of the Nile have been given for the cleansing of all our impurities; their source is in the clouds of heaven, not in the temples of idols; take and use those waters, for you stand in need of them.”

The Emir, duly impressed by the action and speech of Shaban, yielded to his just remonstrances, and, instead of unpacking a large bale of painted cloths, which had just arrived from a far distance, ordered the eunuch to serve the day’s collation in the Hall of the Golden Trellises, and to assemble there all his slaves, and all his birds — of which he kept a large number in aviaries of sandalwood.

Immediately the palace rang to the sound of instruments of music, and groups of slaves appeared, all dressed in their most attractive garments, and each leading in leash a peacock whiter than snow. One only of these slaves — whose slender and graceful form was a delight to the eye — had no bird in leash, and kept her veil down.

“Why this eclipse?” said the Emir to Shaban.

“Lord,” answered he with joyful mien, “I am better than all your astrologers, for it is I who have discovered this lovely star. But do not

imagine that she is yet within your reach; her father, the holy and venerable Iman Abzenderoud, will never consent to make you happy in the possession of her charms unless you perform your ablutions with greater regularity, and give the go-by to the Sages and their hieroglyphics.”

My father, without replying to Shaban, ran to snatch away the veil that hid the countenance of Ghulendi Begum — for such was the name of Abzenderoud’s daughter — and he did so with such violence that he nearly crushed two peacocks, and overturned several baskets of flowers. To this sudden heat succeeded a kind of ecstatic stupor. At last he cried: “How beautiful she is, how divine! Go, fetch at once the Iman of Soussouf — let the nuptial chamber be got ready, and all necessary preparations for our marriage be complete within one hour!”

“But, Lord,” said Shaban, in consternation, “you forget that Ghulendi Begum cannot marry you without the consent of her father, who makes it a condition that you should abandon...”

“What nonsense are you talking?” interrupted the Emir. “Do you think I am fool enough not to prefer this young virgin, fresh as the dew of the morning, to cartloads of hieroglyphics, mouldy and of the color of dead ashes? As to Abzenderoud, go and fetch him if you like — but quickly, for I shall certainly not wait a moment longer than I please.”

“Hasten, Shaban,” said Ghulendi Begum modestly, “hasten; you see that I am not here in case to make any very effectual resistance.”

“It’s my fault,” mumbled the eunuch as he departed, “but I shall do what I can to rectify my error.”

Accordingly he flew to find Abzenderoud. But that faithful servant of Allah had gone from home very early in the morning, and sought the open fields in order to pursue his pious investigations into the growth of plants and the life of insects. A death-like pallor overspread his countenance when

he saw Shaban swooping down upon him like a raven of ill omen, and heard him tell, in broken accents, how the Emir had promised nothing, and how he himself might well arrive too late to exact the pious conditions he had so deeply pondered. Nevertheless, the Iman did not lose courage, and reached my father's palace in a very few moments; but unfortunately he was by this time so out of breath that he sank down on a sofa, and remained for over an hour panting and breathless.

While all the eunuchs were doing their best to revive the holy man, Shaban had quickly gone up to the apartment assigned to Abou Taher Achmed's pleasures; but his zeal suffered some diminution when he saw the door guarded by two black eunuchs, who, brandishing their sabres, informed him that if he ventured to take one more step forward, his head would roll at his own feet. Therefore he had nothing better to do than to return to Abzenderoud, whose gaspings he regarded with wild and troubled eyes, lamenting the while over his own imprudence in bringing Ghulendi Begum within the Emir's power.

Notwithstanding the care my father was taking for the entertainment of the new sultana, he had heard something of the dispute between the black eunuchs and Shaban, and had a fair notion of what was going on. As soon, therefore, as he judged it convenient, he came to find Abzenderoud in the Hall of the Golden Trellises, and presenting Ghulendi Begum to the holy man assured him that, while awaiting his arrival, he, the Emir, had made her his wife.

At these words, the Iman uttered a lamentable and piercing cry, which relieved the pressure on his chest; and, rolling his eyes in a fearful manner, he said to the new sultana: "Wretched woman, dost thou not know that rash and ill-considered acts lead ever to a miserable end? Thy father would have made thy lot secure; but thou hast not awaited the result of his efforts, or

rather it is Heaven itself that mocks all human previsions. I ask nothing more of the Emir; let him deal with thee, and with his hieroglyphics, as he deems best! I foresee untold evils in the future; but I shall not be there to witness them. Rejoice for a while, intoxicated with thy pleasures. As for me, I call to my aid the Angel of Death, and hope, within three days, to rest in peace in the bosom of our great Prophet!”

After saying these words, he rose to his feet, tottering. His daughter strove in vain to hold him back. He tore his robe from her trembling hands. She fell fainting to the ground, and while the distracted Emir was striving to bring her back again to her senses, the obstinate Abzenderoud went muttering from the room.

At first it was thought that the holy man would not keep his vow quite literally, and would suffer himself to be comforted; but such was not the case. On reaching his own house, he began by stopping his ears by cotton wool, so as not to hear the clamor and adjuration of his friends; and then, having seated himself on the mats in his cell, with his legs crossed, and his head in his hands, he remained in that posture speechless, and taking no food; and finally, at the end of three days, expired according to his prayer. He was buried magnificently, and during the obsequies Shaban did not fail to manifest his grief by slashing his flesh without mercy, and soaking the earth with little rivulets of his blood; after which, having caused balm to be applied to his wounds, he returned to the duties of his office.

Meanwhile, the Emir had no small difficulty in assuaging the despair of Ghulendi Begum, and often cursed the hieroglyphics which had been its first efficient cause. At last his attentions touched the heart of the sultana. She regained her ordinary equability of spirits, and became pregnant; and everything returned to its accustomed order.

The Emir, his mind always dwelling on the magnificence of the ancient Pharaohs, built, after their manner, a palace with twelve pavilions — proposing, at an early date, to install in each pavilion a son. Unfortunately, his wives brought forth nothing but daughters. At each new birth he grumbled, gnashed his teeth, accused Mahomet of being the cause of his mishaps, and would have been altogether unbearable, if Ghulendi Begum had not found means to moderate his evil temper. She induced him to come every night into her apartment, where, by a thousand ingenious devices, she succeeded in introducing fresh air, while, in other parts of the palace, the atmosphere was stifling.

During her pregnancy my father never left the dais on which she reclined. This dais was set on a large and long gallery overlooking the Nile, and so disposed as to seem about on a level with the stream, — so close, too, that anyone reclining upon it could throw into the water the seeds of any pomegranate he might be eating. The best dancers, the most excellent magicians, were always about the palace. Every night pantomimes were performed to the light of a thousand golden lamps — lamps placed upon the floor so as to bring out the fineness and grace of the performers' feet. The dancers themselves cost my father immense sums in golden-fringed slippers and sandals a-glitter with jewelry; and, indeed, when they were all in motion together the effect was dazzling.

But notwithstanding this accumulation of splendors, the sultana passed very unhappy days on her dais. With the same indifference that a poor wretch tormented by sleeplessness watches the scintillations of the stars, so did she see pass before her eyes all this whirl of performers in their brilliancy and charm. Anon she would think of the wrath, that seemed almost prophetic, of her venerable father; anon she would deplore his strange and untimely end. A thousand times she would interrupt the choir of

singers, crying: "Fate has decreed my ruin! Heaven will not vouchsafe me a son, and my husband will banish me from his sight!" The torment of her mind intensified the pain and discomfort attendant on her condition. My father, thereupon, was so greatly perturbed that, for the first time in his life, he made appeal to Heaven, and ordered prayers to be offered up in every mosque. Nor did he omit the giving of alms, for he caused it to be publicly announced that all beggars were to assemble in the largest court of the palace, and would there be served with rice, each according to his individual appetite. There followed such a crush every morning at the palace gates that the incomers were nearly suffocated. Mendicants swarmed in from all parts, by land, and by river. Whole villages would come down the stream on rafts. And the appetites of all were enormous; for the buildings which my father had erected, his costly pursuit of hieroglyphics, and his maintenance of the Sages, had caused some scarcity throughout the land.

Among those who came from a very far distance was a man of an extreme age, and great singularity, by name Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, the hermit of the Great Sandy Desert. He was eight feet high, so ill-proportioned, and of a leanness so extreme, that he looked like a skeleton, and was hideous to behold. Nevertheless, this lugubrious and forbidden piece of human mechanism enshrined the most benevolent and religious spirit in the universe. With a voice of thunder he proclaimed the will of the Prophet, and said openly it was a pity that a prince who distributed rice to the poor, and in such great profusion, should be a lover of hieroglyphics. People crowded around him — the Imans, the Mullahs, the Muezens, did nothing but sing his praises. His feet, though ingrained with the sand of his native desert, were freely kissed. Nay, the very grains of the sand from his feet were gathered up, and treasured in caskets of amber.

One day he proclaimed the truth and the horror of the sciences of evil, in a voice so loud and resonant that the great standards set before the palace trembled. The terrible sound penetrated into the interior of the harem. The women and the eunuchs fainted away in the Hall of the Golden Trellises; the dancers stood with one foot arrested in the air; the mummers had not the courage to pursue their antics; the musicians suffered their instruments to fall to the ground; and Ghulendi Begum thought to die of fright as she lay on her dais.

Abou Taher Achmed stood astounded. His conscience smote him for his idolatrous proclivities, and during a few remorseful moments he thought that the Avenging Angel had come to turn him into stone — and not himself only but the people committed to his charge.

After standing for some time, upright, with arms uplifted, in the Gallery of the Daises, he called Shaban to him, and said: “The sun has not lost its brightness, the Nile flows peacefully in its bed, what means then this supernatural cry that has just resounded through my palace?”

“Lord,” answered the pious eunuch, “this voice is the voice of Truth, and is spoken to you through the mouth of the venerable Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, the Hermit of the Sandy Desert, the most faithful, the most zealous, of the servants of the Prophet, who has, in nine days, journeyed three hundred leagues to make proof of your hospitality, and to impart to you the knowledge with which he is inspired. Do not neglect the teachings of a man who in wisdom, in piety, and in stature, surpasses the most enlightened, the most devout, and the most gigantic of the inhabitants of earth. All your people are in an ecstasy. Trade is at a standstill. The inhabitants of the city hasten to hear him, neglecting their wonted assemblies in the public gardens. The story-tellers are without hearers at the

margins of the public fountains. Joussouf himself was not wiser than he, and had no greater knowledge of the future.”

At these last words, the Emir was suddenly smitten with the desire of consulting Abou Gabdolle with regard to his family affairs, and particularly with regard to the great projects he entertained for the future advantage of his sons, who were not yet born. He deemed himself happy in being thus able to consult a living prophet; for, so far, it was only in the form of mummies that he had been brought into relation with these inspired personages. He resolved, therefore, to summon into his presence, nay, into his very harem, the extraordinary being now in question. Would not the Pharaohs have so dealt with the necromancers of their time, and was not he determined, in all circumstances, to follow the Pharaohs’ example? He therefore graciously directed Shaban to go and fetch the holy man.

Shaban, transported with joy, hastened to communicate this invitation to the hermit, who, however, did not appear to be as much charmed by the summons as were the people at large. These latter filled the air with their acclamations, while Abou Gabdolle stood still, with his hands clasped, and his eyes uplifted to heaven, in a prophetic trance. From time to time he uttered the deepest sighs, and, after, remaining long rapt in holy contemplation, shouted out, in his voice of thunder: “Allah’s will be done! I am but his creature. Eunuch, I am ready to follow thee. But let the doors of the palace be broken down. It is not meet for the servants of the Most High to bend their heads.”

The people needed no second command. They all set hands to the work with a will, and in an instant the gateway, a piece of the most admirable workmanship, was utterly ruined.

At the sound of the breaking in of the doors, piercing cries arose within the harem, Abou Taher Achmend began to repent of his curiosity.

Nevertheless, he ordered, though somewhat reluctantly, that the passages into the harem should be laid open to the holy giant, for he feared lest the enthusiastic adherents of the prophet should penetrate into the apartments occupied by the women, and containing the princely treasures. These fears were, however, vain, for the holy man had sent back his devout admirers. I have been assured that on their all kneeling to receive his blessing he said to them, in tones of the deepest solemnity: "Retire, remain peacefully in your dwellings, and be assured that, whatever happens, Abou Gabdolle Guehaman is prepared for every emergency." Then, turning towards the palace, he cried: "O domes of dazzling brilliancy, receive me, and may nothing ensue to tarnish your splendor."

Meanwhile, everything had been made ready within the harem. Screens had been duly ordered, the door-curtains had been drawn, and ample draperies hung before the daises in the long gallery that ran round the interior of the building — thus concealing from view the sultanas, and the princesses, their daughters.

Such elaborate preparations had caused a general ferment; and curiosity was at its height, when the hermit, trampling under foot the ruined fragments of the doorways, entered majestically into the Hall of the Golden Trellises. The magnificence of the palace did not even win from him a passing glance, his eyes remained fixed, mournfully, on the pavement at his feet. At last he penetrated into the great gallery of the women. These latter, who were not at all accustomed to the sight of creatures so lean, gaunt, and gigantic, uttered piercing cries, and loudly asked for essences and cordials to enable them to bear up against the apparition of such a phantasm.

The hermit paid not the smallest heed to the surrounding tumult. He was gravely pursuing his way, when the Emir came forward, and, taking him by the skirt of his garment, led him, with much ceremony, to the dais of the

gallery which looked out upon the Nile. Basins of comfits and orthodox liquors were at once served; but though Abou Gabdolle Guehaman seemed to be dying of hunger, he refused to partake of these refreshments, saying that for ninety years he had drunk nothing but the dew of heaven, and eaten only the locusts of the desert. The Emir, who regarded this diet as conformable to what might properly be expected of a prophet, did not press him further, but at once entered into the question he had at heart, saying how much it grieved him to be without a male heir, notwithstanding all the prayers offered up to that effect, and the flattering hopes which the Imans had given him. "But now," he continued, "I am assured that this happiness will at last be mine. The Sages, the mediciners, predict it, and my own observations confirm their prognostications. It is not, therefore, with the purpose of consulting you with regard to the future that I have caused you to be summoned. It is for the purpose of obtaining your advice upon the education I should give to the son whose birth I am expecting or rather, to the two sons, for, without doubt, in recognition of my alms. Heaven will accord to the Sultana Ghulendi Begum a double measure of fertility, seeing that she is twice as large as women usually are on such occasions."

Without answering a word, the hermit mournfully shook his head three times.

My father, greatly astonished, asked if his anticipated good fortune was in any wise displeasing to the holy man.

"Ah! too blind prince," replied the hermit, uttering a cavernous sigh that seemed to issue from the grave itself, "why importune Heaven with rash prayers? Respect its decrees! It knows what is best for all men better than they do themselves. Woe be to you, and woe be to the son whom you will doubtless compel to follow in the perverse ways of your own beliefs, instead of submitting himself humbly to the guidance of Providence. If the

great of this world could only foresee all the misfortunes they bring upon themselves, they would tremble in the midst of their splendor. Pharaoh recognized this truth, but too late. He pursued the children of Moussa in despite of the divine decrees, and died the death of the wicked. What can alms avail when the heart is in rebellion? Instead of asking the Prophet for an heir, to be led by you into the paths of destruction, those who have your welfare at heart should implore him to cause Ghulendi Begum to die — yes, to die before she brings into the world presumptuous creatures, whom your conduct will precipitate into the abyss! Once again I call upon you to submit. If Allah's angel threatens to cut short the days of the sultana, do not make appeal to your magicians to ward off the fatal blow: let it fall, let her die! Tremble not with wrath, Emir; harden not your heart! Once again call to mind the fate of Pharaoh and the waters that swallowed him up!”

“Call them to mind yourself!” cried my father, foaming with rage, and springing from the dais to run to the aid of the sultana, who, having heard all, had fainted away behind the curtains. “Remember that the Nile flows beneath these windows, and that thou hast well deserved that thy odious carcass should be hurled into its, waters!”

“I fear not,” cried the gigantic hermit in turn; “the prophet of Allah fears naught but himself,” and he rose on the tips of his toes and touched with his hands the supports of the dome of the apartment.

“Ha! ha! thou fearest nothing,” cried all the women and eunuchs, issuing like tigers out of their den. “Accursed assassin, thou hast just brought our beloved mistress to death's door, and yet fearest nothing! Go, and become food for the monsters of the river!” Screaming out these words, they threw themselves, all at once, on Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, bore him down, strangled him without pity, and cast his body through a dark grating into the Nile, which there lost itself obscurely among the piers of iron.

The Emir, astonished by an act at once so sudden and so atrocious, remained with his eyes fixed on the waters; but the body did not again come to the surface; and Shaban, who now appeared upon the scene, bewildered him with his cries. At last he turned to look upon the perpetrators of the crime; but they had scattered in every direction, and hidden behind the curtains of the gallery, each avoiding the other, they were all overwhelmed by the thought of what they had done.

Ghulendi, who had only come to herself in time to witness this scene of horror, was now in mortal anguish. Her convulsions, her agonizing cries, drew the Emir to her side. He bedewed her hand with tears. She opened her eyes wildly, and cried: “O Allah! Allah! put an end to a wretched creature who has already lived only too long, since she has been the cause of so terrible an outrage, and suffer not that she should bring into the world—”

“Stop, stop,” interrupted the Emir, holding her hands which she was about to turn against herself, “thou shalt not die, and my children shall yet live to give the lie to that demented skeleton, worthy only of contempt. Let my Sages be summoned instantly. Let them use all their art to keep thy soul from flitting hence and to save from harm the fruit of thy body.”

The Sages were convened accordingly. They demanded that one of the courts in the palace should be placed entirely at their disposal, and there began their operations, kindling a fire whose light penetrated into the gallery. The sultana rose from her couch, notwithstanding all the efforts made to restrain her, and ran to the balcony overlooking the Nile. The view from thence was lonely and drear. Not a single boat showed upon the surface of the stream. In the distance were discernible reaches of sand which the wind, from time to time, sent whirling into the air. The rays of the setting sun dyed the waters blood-red. Scarcely had the deepening twilight stretched over the horizon, when a sudden and furious wind broke the open

lattice-work of the gallery. The sultana, beside herself, her heart beating, tried to plunge back into the interior of the apartment, but an irresistible power held her where she was, and forced her, against her will, to contemplate the mournful scene before her eyes. A great silence now reigned. Darkness had insensibly covered the earth. Then suddenly a streak of blue light furrowed the clouds in the direction of the pyramids. The princess could distinguish their enormous mass against the horizon as clearly as if it had been noonday. The spectacle thus suddenly revealed, chilled her with fear. Several times did she try to call her slaves, but her voice refused its office. She endeavored to clap her hands, but in vain.

While she remained thus — as if in the grip of some horrible dream — a lamentable voice broke into the stillness, and uttered these words: “My latest breath has just been exhaled into the waters of the river; vainly have thy servants striven to stifle the voice of truth; it rises now from the abysses of death. O wretched mother! see whence issues that fatal light, and tremble!”

Ghulendi Begum endured to hear no more. She fell back senseless. Her women, who had been anxious about her, hurried up at this moment, and uttered the most piercing cries. The Sages approached, and placed into the hands of my father, who was in terrible perturbation, the powerful elixir they had prepared. Scarcely had a few drops fallen on the sultana’s breast, when her soul, which had seemed about to follow the orders of Asrael, the Angel of Death, came back, as if in nature’s despite, to reanimate her body. Her eyes reopened to see, still illumining the pyramids, the fatal furrow of blue light which had not yet faded from the sky. She raised her arms, and, pointing out to the Emir with her finger that dread portent, was seized with the pains of childbirth, and, in the paroxysm of an unspeakable anguish,

brought into the world a son and a daughter: the two wretched beings you see before you here.

The Emir's joy in the possession of a male child was greatly dashed when he saw my mother die before his eyes. Notwithstanding his excessive grief, however, he did not lose his head, and at once handed us over to the care of his Sages. The nurses, who had been engaged in great number, wished to oppose this arrangement; but the ancient men, all uttering incantations simultaneously, compelled them to silence. The cabalistic lavers in which we were to be immersed stood all ready prepared; the mixture of herbs exhaled a vapor that filled the whole palace. Shadan, whose very stomach was turned by the odor of these unspeakable drugs, had all the trouble in the world to restrain himself from summoning the Imans, and doctors of the law, in order to oppose the impious rites now in contemplation. Would to Heaven he had had the courage to do so! Ah, how terrible has been the influence upon us of the pernicious immersions to which we were then subjected! In short, Lord, we were plunged, both successively and together, into a hell-broth which was intended to impart to us a strength and intelligence more than human, but has only instilled into our veins the ardent elixir of a too exquisite sensibility, and the poison of an insatiable desire.

It was to the sound of brazen wands beating against the metal sides of the lavers, it was in the midst of thick fumes issuing from heaps of burning herbs, that invocations were addressed to the Jinns, and specially to those who preside over the pyramids, in order that we might be endowed with miraculous gifts. After this we were delivered over to the nurses, who scarcely could hold us in their arms, such was our liveliness and vivacity. The good women shed tears when they saw how our young blood boiled within us, and strove in vain to cool its effervescence, and to calm us by

cleansing our bodies from the reeking mess with which they were still covered; but, alas! the harm was already done! Nay, if even, as sometimes happened in after days, we wished to fall into the ordinary ways of childhood, my father, who was determined at all hazards to possess children of an extraordinary nature, would brisk us up with heating drugs and the milk of negresses.

We thus became unendurably headstrong and mettlesome. At the age of seven, we could not bear contradiction. At the slightest restraint, we uttered cries of rage, and bit those who had us in charge till the blood flowed. Shaban came in for a large share of our attentions in this kind; sighing over us, however, in silence, for the Emir only regarded our spitefulness as giving evidence of a genius equal to that of Saurid and Charobé. Ah! how little did anyone suspect the real cause of our forwardness! Those who look long into the light are soonest afflicted with blindness. My father had not yet remarked that we were never arrogant and overbearing towards one another; that each was ready to yield to the other's wishes; that Kalilah, my brother, was never at peace save in my arms; and that, as for me, my only happiness lay in overwhelming him with caresses.

Up to this time, we had in all things been educated together: the same book was always placed before the eyes of both, each turned over the leaves alternately. Though my brother was subjected to a course of study rigorous, and above his years, I insisted on sharing it with him. Abou Taher Achmed, who cared for nothing save the aggrandisement of his son, gave directions that in this I should be humored, because he saw that his son would only fully exert himself when at my side.

We were taught not only the history of the most remote ages of antiquity, but also the geography of distant lands. The Sages never ceased to indoctrinate us with the abstruse and ideal moral code, which, as they

pretended, lurked hidden in the hieroglyphics. They filled our cars with a magnificent verbiage about wisdom and foreknowledge, and the treasure houses of the Pharaohs, whom sometimes they compared to ants, and sometimes to elephants. They inspired us with a most ardent curiosity as to those mountains of hewn stone beneath which the Egyptian kings lie sepulchred. They compelled us to learn by heart the long catalogue of architects and masons who had labored at the building of them. They made us calculate the quality of provisions that would be required by the workmen employed, and how many threads went to every ell of silk with which Sultan Saurid had covered his pyramid. Together with all this rubbish, these most weariful old dotards bewildered our brains with a pitiless grammar of the language spoken of old by the priests in their subterranean labyrinths.

The childish games in which we were allowed to indulge, during our playtime, had no charms for us unless we played them together. The princesses, our sisters, wearied us to death. Vainly did they embroider for my brother the most splendid vests. Kalilah disdained their gifts, and would only consent to bind his lovely hair with the muslim that had floated over the breast of his beloved Zulkais. Sometimes they invited us to visit them in the twelve pavilions which my father, no longer hoping to have that number of sons, had abandoned to their use — erecting another, and of greater magnificence, for my brother, and for myself. This latter building, crowned by five domes, and situated in a thick grove, was, every night, the scene of the most splendid revels in the harem. My father would come thither, escorted by his most beautiful slaves — each holding in her hand a candlestick with a white taper. How many times has the light of these tapers, appearing through the trees, caused our hearts to beat in sad anticipation? Everything that broke in upon our solitude was in the highest

degree distasteful. To hide among the leafage, and listen to its murmur, seemed to us sweeter far than attending to the sound of the lute and the song of the musicians. But these soft luxurious reveries of ours were highly offensive to my father, he would force us back into the cupolaed saloons, and force us to take part in the common amusements.

Every year the Emir treated us with greater sternness. He did not dare to separate us altogether for fear of the effect upon his son, but tried rather to win him from our languorous dalliance by throwing him more and more into the company of young men of his own age. The game of reeds, so famous among the Arabs, was introduced into the courts of the palace. Kalilah gave himself up to the sport with immense energy; but this was only so as to bring the games to a speedier end, and then fly back to my side. Once reunited we would read together, read of the loves of Jussouf and Zelica, or some other poem that spoke of love — or else, taking advantage of our moments of liberty, we would roam through the labyrinth of corridors looking out upon the Nile, always with our arms intertwined, always with eyes looking into each other's eyes. It was almost impossible to track us in the mazy passages of the palace; and the anxiety we inspired did but add to our happiness.

One evening when we were thus tenderly alone together, and running side by side in childish glee, my father appeared before us and shuddered. "Why," said he to Kalilah, "why are you here and not in the great courtyard, shooting with the bow, or else with the horse-trainers training the horses which are to bear you into battle? Must the sun, as it rises and sets, see you only bloom and fade like a weak narcissus flower? Vainly do the Sages try to move you by the most eloquent discourses, and unveil before your eyes the learned mysteries of an older time; vainly do they tell you of warlike and magnanimous deeds. You are now nearly thirteen, and never have you

evinced the smallest ambition to distinguish yourself among your fellow-men. It is not in the lurking haunts of effeminacy that great characters are formed; it is not by reading love poems that men are made fit to govern nations! Princes must act; they must show themselves to the world. Awake! Cease to abuse my patience which has too long allowed you to waste your hours by the side of Zulkaïs. Let her, tender creature that she is, continue to play among her flowers, but do you cease to haunt her company from dawn till eve. I see well enough that it is she who is perverting you.”

Having spoken these words, which he emphasized by angry and threatening gestures, Abou Taher Achmed took my brother by the arm, and left me in a very abyss of bitterness. An icy numbness overcame me. Though the sun still shed its fullest rays upon the water, I felt as if it had disappeared below the horizon. Stretched at length upon the ground, I did nothing but kiss the sprays of orange flower that Kalilah had gathered. My sight fell upon the drawings he had traced, and my tears fell in greater abundance. “Alas!” said I, “All is over. Our blissful moments will return no more. Why accuse me of perverting Kalilah? What harm can I do him? How can our happiness offend my father? If it was a crime to be happy, the Sages would surely have given us warning.”

My nurse Shamelah found me in this condition of languor and dejection. To dissipate my grief she immediately led me to the grove where the young girls of the harem were playing at hide-and-seek amid the golden aviaries of which the place was full. I derived some little solace from the song of the birds, and the murmur of the rilllets of clear water that trickled round the roots of the trees, but when the hour came at which Kalilah was wont to appear these sounds did but add to my sufferings.

Shamelah noticed the heavings of my breast; she drew me aside, placed her hand upon my heart, and observed me attentively. I blushed, I turned

pale, and that very visibly. "I see very well," said she, "that it is your brother's absence that so upsets you. This is the fruit of the strange education to which you have been subjected. The holy reading of the Koran, the due observance of the Prophet's laws, confidence in the known mercies of Allah, these are as milk to cool the fever heat of human passion. You know not the soft delight of lifting up your soul to Heaven, and submitting without a murmur to its decrees. The Emir, alas! would forestall the future; while, on the contrary, the future should be passively awaited. Dry your tears; perchance Kalilah is not unhappy though distant from your side."

"Ah!" I cried, interrupting her with a sinister look, "if I were not fully convinced that he is unhappy, I should myself be far more miserable."

Shamelah trembled at hearing me speak thus. She cried: "Would to Heaven that they had listened to my advice, and the advice of Shaban, and instead of handing you over to the capricious teaching of the Sages, had left you, like true believers, at peace in the arms of a blissful and quiet ignorance. The ardor of your feelings alarms me in the very highest degree. Nay, it excites my indignation. Be more calm; abandon your soul to the innocent pleasures that surround you, and do so without troubling yourself whether Kalilah shares in those pleasures or not. His sex is made for toil and manly hardship. How should you be able to follow him in the chase, to handle a bow, and to dart reeds in the Arab game? He must look for companions manly and worthy of himself, and cease to fritter away his best days here at your side amid bowers and aviaries."

This sermon, far from producing its desired effect, made me altogether beside myself. I trembled with rage, and, rising to my feet like one bereft of reason, I rent my veil into ten thousand pieces, and, tearing my breast, cried with a loud voice that my nurse had mishandled me.

The games ceased. Everyone crowded about me; and though the princesses did not love me overmuch, because I was Kalilah's favorite sister, yet my tears, and the blood that flowed from my self-inflicted wounds, excited their indignation against Shamelah. Unfortunately for the poor woman, she had just awarded a severe punishment to two young slaves who had been guilty of stealing pomegranates; and these two little vipers, in order to be revenged, bore testimony against her, and confirmed all I said. They ran, and retailed their lies to my father, who, not having Shaban at his side, and being, moreover, in a good temper because my brother had just thrown a javelin into a crocodile's eye, ordered Shamelah to be tied to a tree, and whipped without mercy.

Her cries pierced my heart. She cried without ceasing: "O you, whom I have carried in my arms, whom I have fed from my breast, how can you cause me to suffer thus? Justify me! Declare the truth! It is only because I tried to save you from the black abyss, into which your wild and unruly desires cannot fail to precipitate you in the end, that you are thus causing this body of mine to be torn to shreds."

I was about to ask that she should be released and spared further punishment, when some demon put into my mind the thought that it was she who, conjointly with Shaban, had inspired my father with the desire of making a hero of Kalilah. Whereupon I armed myself against every feeling of humanity, and cried out that they should go on whipping her till she confessed her crime. Darkness at last put an end to this horrible scene. The victim was unloosed. Her friends, and she had many, endeavored to close her wounds. They asked me, on their knees, to give them a sovereign balm which I possessed, a balm which the Sages had prepared. I refused. Shamelah was placed before my eyes on a litter, and, of set purpose, kept for a moment in front of the place where I stood. That breast, on which I

had so often slept, streamed with blood. At this spectacle, at the memory of the tender care she had taken of my infancy, my heart at last was moved — I burst into tears; I kissed the hand she feebly extended to the monster she had nourished in her bosom; I ran to fetch the balm; I applied it myself, begging her, at the same time, to forgive me, and declaring openly that she was innocent, and I alone guilty.

This confession caused a shudder to pass among all who surrounded us. They recoiled from me with horror. Shamelah, though half dead, perceived this, and stifled her groans with the skirt of her garment so as not to add to my despair and the baleful consequences of what I had done. But her efforts were vain. All fled, casting upon me looks that were evil indeed.

The litter was removed, and I found myself alone. The night was very dark. Plaintive sounds seemed to issue from the cypresses that cast their shadows over the place. Seized with terror, I lost myself amid the black foliage, a prey to the most harrowing remorse. Delirium laid its hand upon me. The earth seemed to yawn before my feet, and I to fall headlong into an abyss which had no bottom. My spirit was in this distraught condition when, through the thick underwood, I saw shine the torches of my father's attendants. I noticed that the cortège stopped suddenly. Someone issued from the crowd. A lively presentiment made my heart beat. The footsteps came nearer; and, by the light of a faint and doleful glimmer, such as prevails in the place where we now are, I saw Kalilah appear before me.

“Dear Zulkais,” cried he, intermingling words and kisses, “I have passed an age without seeing you, but I have spent it in carrying out my father's wishes. I have fought with one of the most formidable monsters of the river. But what would I not do when, for recompense, I am offered the bliss of spending a whole evening with you alone? Come! Let us enjoy the time to the full. Let us bury ourselves among these trees. Let us, from our retreat,

listen, disdainful, to the tumultuous sound of music and dances. I will cause sherbet and cakes to be served on the moss that borders the little porphyry fountain. There I shall enjoy your sweet looks, and charming converse, till the first dawn of the new day. Then, alas! I must plunge once more into the world's vortex, dart accursed reeds, and undergo the interrogatories of Sages."

Kalilah said all this with such volubility that I was unable to put in a word. He drew me after him, scarce resisting. We made our way through the leafage to the fountain. The memory of what Shamelah had said concerning my excessive tenderness for my brother, had, in my own despite, produced a strong impression upon me. I was about to withdraw my hand from his, when, by the light of the little lamps that had been lit on the margin of the fountain, I saw his charming face reflected in the waters, I saw his large eyes dewy with love, I felt his looks pierce to the very bottom of my heart. All my projects of reform, all my agony of remorse, made way for a ferment of very different feelings. I dropped on the ground by Kalilah's side, and leaning his head upon my breast, gave a free course to my tears. Kalilah, when he saw me thus crying passionately, eagerly asked me why I wept, I told him all that had passed between myself and Shamelah, without omitting a single particular. His heart was at first much moved by the picture I drew of her sufferings; but, a moment after, he cried: "Let the officious slave perish! Must the heart's soft yearnings ever meet with opposition! How should we not love one another, Zulkais? Nature caused us to be born together. Has not nature, too, implanted in us the same tastes, and a kindred ardor? Have not my father and his Sages made us partakers in the same magic baths? Who could blame a sympathy all has conspired to create? No, Zulkais, Shaban and our superstitious nurse may say what they please. There is no crime in our loving one another. The crime would rather

be if we allowed ourselves, like cowards, to be separated. Let us swear — not by the Prophet, of whom we have little knowledge, but by the elements that sustain man's existence — let us swear that, rather than consent to live the one without the other, we will take into our veins the soft distillation of the flowers of the stream, which the Sages have so often vaunted in our hearing. That essence will lull us painlessly to sleep in each other's arms, and so bear our souls imperceptibly into the peace of another existence."

These words quieted me. I resumed my ordinary gaiety, and we played and sported together. "I shall be very valiant tomorrow," Kalilah would say, "so as to purchase such moments as these, for it is only by the promise of such a prize that my father can induce me to submit to his fantastic injunctions."

"Ha, ha!" cried Abou Taber Achmed, issuing from behind some bushes, where he had been listening. "Is that your resolve! We will see if you keep to it! You are already fully paid this evening for the little you have done during the day. Hence! And as to you, Zulkaïs, go and weep over the terrible outrage you have committed against Shamelah."

In the greatest consternation we threw ourselves at his feet; but, turning his back upon us, he ordered the eunuchs to conduct us to our separate apartments.

It was no scruple with regard to the kind and quality of our love that exercised the Emir. His sole end was to see his son become a great warrior, and a potent prince, and with regard to the character of the means by which that end was to be obtained, he cared not one tittle. As for me, he regarded me only as an instrument that might have its uses; nor would he have felt any scruples concerning the danger of inflaming our passion by the alternation of obstacles and concessions. On the other hand, he foresaw that indolence and pleasure, too constantly indulged in, must necessarily

interfere with his designs. He deemed it necessary, therefore, to adopt with us a harsher and more decided line of conduct than he had hitherto done; and in an unhappy moment he carried that resolution into effect. Alas! without his precautions, his projects, his accursed foresight, we should have remained in innocence, and never been brought to the horror of this place of torment!

The Emir, having retired to his apartments, caused Shaban to be summoned, and imparted to him his fixed resolve to separate us during a certain time. The prudent eunuch prostrated himself immediately, with his face to the ground, and then, rising to his feet, said: "Let my lord forgive his slave if he ventures to be of a different opinion. Do not loose upon this nascent flame the winds of opposition and absence, lest the final conflagration should be such as you are unable to master. You know the Prince's impetuous disposition; his sister has today given proofs, only too signal, of hers. Suffer them to remain together without contradiction; leave them to their childish propensities. They will soon grow tired of one another; and Kalilah, disgusted with the monotony of the harem, will beg you on his knees to remove him from its precincts."

"Have you done talking your nonsense?" interrupted the Emir impatiently. "Ah, how little do you know the genius of Kalilah! I have carefully studied him, I have seen that the operations of my Sages have not been void of their effect. He is incapable of pursuing any object with indifference. If I leave him with Zulkais, he will be utterly drowned in effeminacy. If I remove her from him, and make their reunion the price of the great things I require at his hands, there is nothing of which he will not prove himself capable. Let the doctors of our law dote as they please! What can their idle drivel matter so long as he becomes what I desire him to be? Know besides, O eunuch, that when he has once tasted the delights of

ambition, the idea of Zulkaïs will evaporate in his mind as a light morning mist absorbed into the rays of the noonday sun — the sun of glory. Therefore enter tomorrow morning into the chamber of Zulkaïs, forestall her awakening, wrap her up in these robes, and convey, her, with her slaves and all that may be necessary to make her life pleasant, to the borders of the Nile, where a boat will be ready to receive you. Follow the course of the stream for twenty nine days. On the thirtieth you will disembark at the Isle of Ostriches. Lodge the princess in the palace which I have had built for the use of the Sages who roam those deserts — deserts replete with ruins and with wisdom. One of these Sages you will find there, called the Palm-tree-climber, because he pursues his course of contemplation upon the tops of the palm-trees. This ancient man knows an infinite number of stories, and it will be his care to divert Zulkaïs, for I know very well that, next to Kalilah, stories are the chief object of her delight.”

Shaban knew his master too well to venture upon any further opposition. He went, therefore, to give the necessary orders, but sighed heavily as he went. He had not the slightest desire to undertake a journey to the Isle of Ostriches, and had formed a very unfavorable opinion of the Palm-tree-climber. He was himself a faithful Mussulman, and held the Sages and all their works in abomination.

Everything was made ready all too soon. The agitation of the previous day had greatly fatigued me, so that I slept very heavily. I was taken from my bed so quietly, and carried with such skill, that I never woke till I was at a distance of four leagues from Cairo. Then the noise of the water gurgling round the boat began to alarm me. It filled my ears strangely, and I half fancied I had drunk of the beverage spoken of by Kalilah, and been borne beyond the confines of our planet. I lay thus, bewildered with strange imaginings, and did not dare to open my eyes, but stretched out my arms to

feel for Kalilah. I thought he was by my side, judge of the feelings of hateful surprise to which I was doomed, when, instead of touching his delicate limbs, I seized hold of the horny hand of the eunuch who was steering the boat, and was even older, and more grotesquely ugly, than Shaban himself.

I sat up and uttered piercing cries. I opened my eyes, and saw before me a waste stretch of sky, and of water bounded by bluish banks. The sun was shining in its fullness. The azure heavens caused all nature to rejoice. A thousand river birds played around amid the water-lilies, which the boat shot through at every moment, their large yellow flowers shining like gold, and exhaling a sweet perfume. But all these objects of delight were lost upon me, and, instead of rejoicing my heart, filled me with a somber melancholy.

Looking about me, I saw my slaves in a state of desolation, and Shaban who, with an air at once of discontent and authority, was making them keep silence. The name of Kalilah came at every moment to the tip of my tongue. At last I spoke it aloud, with tears in my eyes, and asked where he was, and what they intended to do with me. Shaban, instead of replying, ordered his eunuchs to redouble their exertions, and to strike up an Egyptian song, and sing in time to the cadence of their oars. Their accursed chorus rang out so potently that it brought an even worse bewilderment in my brain. We shot through the water like an arrow. It was in vain that I begged the rowers to stop, or at least to tell me where I was going. The barbarous wretches were deaf to my entreaties. The more insistent I was, the louder did they roar out their detestable song so as to drown my cries. Shaban, with his cracked voice, made more noise than the rest.

Nothing can express the torments I endured, and the horror I felt at finding myself so far from Kalilah, and on the waters of the fearful Nile.

My terrors increased with nightfall. I saw, with an inexpressible anguish, the sun go losing itself in the waters — its light, in a thousand rays, trembling upon their surface. I brought to mind the quiet moments which, at that same hour, I had passed with Kalilah, and, hiding my head in my veil, I gave myself up to despair.

Soon a soft rustling became audible. Our boat was shearing its way through banks of reeds. A great silence succeeded to the song of the rowers, for Shaban had landed. He came back in a few moments, and carried me to a tent, erected a few paces from the river's bank. I found there lights, mattresses stretched on the ground, a table covered with various kinds of food, and an immense copy of the Koran, unfolded. I hated the holy book. The Sages, our instructors, had often turned it into ridicule, and I had never read it with Kalilah. So I threw it contemptuously to the ground. Shaban took upon himself to scold me; but I flew at him, and endeavored to reduce him to silence. In this I proved successful, and the same treatment retained its efficacy during the whole course of the long expedition.

Our subsequent experiences were similar to those of the first day. Endlessly did we pass banks of water-lilies, and flocks of birds, and an infinite number of small boats that came and went with merchandize.

At last we began to leave behind us the plain country. Like all who are unhappy and thus led to look forward, I kept my eyes continually fixed on the horizon ahead of us, and one evening I saw, rising there, great masses of much greater height, and of a form infinitely more varied, than the pyramids. These masses proved to be mountains. Their aspect inspired me with fear. The terrible thought occurred to me that my father was sending me to the woeful land of the Negro king, so that I might be offered up as a sacrifice to the idols, who, as the Sages pretended, were greedy of princesses. Shaban perceived my increasing distress, and at last took pity

upon me. He revealed our ultimate destination, adding that though my father wished to separate me from Kalilah, it was not forever, and that, in the meanwhile, I should make the acquaintance of a marvelous personage, called the Palm-tree-climber, who was the best story-teller in the universe.

This information quieted me to some extent. The hope, however distant, of seeing Kalilah again, poured balm into my soul, and I was not sorry to hear that I should have stories to my liking. Moreover, the idea of a realm of solitude, such as the Ostrich Isle, flattered my romantic spirit. If I must be separated from him whom I cherished more than life itself, I preferred to undergo my fate rather in some savage spot than amid the glitter and chatter of a harem. Far from all such impertinent frivolities, I purposed to abandon my whole soul to the sweet memories of the past, and give a free course to the languorous reveries in which I could see again the loved image of my Kalilah.

Fully occupied with these projects, it was with heedless eyes that I saw our boat approaching nearer and nearer to the land of mountains. The rocks encroached more and more upon the border of the stream, and seemed soon about to deprive us of all sight of the sky. I saw trees of immeasurable height whose intertwined roots hung down in the water. I heard the noise of cataracts, and saw the boiling eddies flash in foam and fill the air with a mist thin as silver gauze. Through this veil I perceived, at last, a green island of no great size, on which the ostriches were gravely promenading. Still further forward I discerned a domed edifice standing against a hill all covered with nests. This palace was utterly strange of aspect, and had, in truth, been built by a noted cabalist. The walls were of yellow marble, and shone like polished metal, and every object reflected in them assumed gigantic proportions. I trembled when I saw what fantastic figures the ostriches presented as seen in that strange mirror; their necks seemed to go

losing themselves in the clouds, and their eyes shone like enormous balls of iron heated red in a furnace.

My terrors were observed by Shaban, who made me understand the magnifying qualities of the palace walls, and assured me that even if the birds were really as monstrous as they appeared, I might trust, in all security, to their good manners, since the Palm-tree-climber had been laboring for over a hundred years to reduce their disposition to an exemplary mildness. Scarcely had he furnished me with this information, when I landed at a spot where the grass was green and fresh. A thousand unknown flowers, a thousand shells of fantastic shape, a thousand oddly fashioned snails, adorned the shore. The ardor of the sun was tempered by the perpetual dew distilled from the falling waters, whose monotonous sound inclined to slumber.

Feeling drowsy, I ordered a penthouse to be affixed to one of the palm-trees of which the place was full; for the Palm-tree-climber, who always bore at his girdle the keys of the palace, was at that hour pursuing his meditations at the other end of the island.

While a soft drowsiness took possession of my senses, Shaban ran to present my father's letters to the man of wisdom. In order to do this, he was compelled to attach the missives to the end of a long pole, as the Climber was at the top of a palm-tree fifty cubits high, and refused to come down without knowing why he was summoned. So soon as he had perused the leaves of the roll, he carried them respectfully to his forehead, and slipped down like a meteor; and indeed he had somewhat the appearance of a meteor, for his eyes were of flame, and his nose was a beautiful blood-red.

Shaban, amazed by the rapidity of the old man's descent, uninjured, from the tree, was somewhat outraged when asked to take him on his back; but the Climber declared that he never so far condescended as to walk. The

eunuch, who loved neither Sages nor their caprices, and regarded both as the plagues of the Emir's family, hesitated for a moment; but, bearing in mind the positive order he had received, he conquered his aversion, and took the Palm-tree-climber on his shoulders, saying: "Alas, the good hermit Abou Gabdolle Guehaman would not have behaved after this manner, and would, moreover, have been much more worthy of my assistance."

The Climber heard these words in high dudgeon, for he had aforetime had pious squabbles with the hermit of the Sandy Desert; so he administered a mighty kick on to the small of Shaban's back, and thrust a fiery nose into the middle of his countenance. Shaban, on this, stumbled, but pursued his way without uttering a syllable.

I was still asleep. Shaban came up to my couch, and, throwing his burden at my feet, said, and his voice had a certain ring in it that woke me without difficulty: "Here is the Climber! Much good may he do you!"

At the sight of such an object, I was quite unable, notwithstanding all my sorrows, to help bursting out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. The old man did not change countenance, notwithstanding; he jingled his keys with an air of importance, and said to Shaban, in grave tones: "Take me again upon your back; let us go to the palace, and I will open its doors, which have never, hitherto, admitted any member of the female sex save my great egg-layer, the queen of the ostriches."

I followed. It was late. The great birds were coming down from the hills, and surrounded us in flocks, pecking at the grass and at the trees. The noise they made with their beaks was such that I seemed to be listening to the feet of an army on the march. At last I found myself before the shining walls of the palace. Though I knew the trick of them, my own distorted figure terrified me, as did also the figure of the Climber on the shoulders of Shaban.

We entered into a vaulted apartment, lined with black marble starred with golden stars, which inspired a certain feeling of awe — a feeling to which, however, the old man's grotesque and amusing grimaces afforded some relief. The air was stifling and nearly made me sick. The Climber, perceiving this, caused a great fire to be lit, and threw into it a small aromatic ball which he drew from his bosom. Immediately a vapor, rather pleasant to the smell, but very penetrating, diffused itself throughout the room. The eunuch fled, sneezing. As for me, I drew near the fire, and sadly stirring the ashes, began to form in them the cipher of Kalilah.

The Climber did not interfere. He praised the education I had received, and approved greatly of our immersions, just after birth, by the Sages, adding maliciously that nothing so sharpened the wits as a passion somewhat out of the common. "I see clearly," he continued, "that you are absorbed in reflections of an interesting nature; and I am well pleased that it should be so. I myself had five sisters; we made very light of Mahomet's teachings, and loved each other with some fervor. I still, after the lapse of a hundred years, bear this in my memory with pleasure, for we scarcely ever forget early impressions. Thus my constancy has greatly commended me to the Jinns whose favorite I am. If you are able, like myself, to persevere in your present sentiments, they will probably do something for you. In the meanwhile, place your confidence in me. I shall not prove surly or unsympathetic as a guardian and keeper. Don't get it into your head that I am dependent on the caprice of your father, who has a limited outlook, and prefers ambition to pleasure. I am happier amid my palms, and my ostriches, and in the enjoyments of the delights of meditation, than he in his divan, and in all his grandeur. I don't mean to say that you yourself cannot add to the pleasures of my life. The more gracious you are to me, the more shall I show civility to you, and make you the partaker in things of beauty.

If you seem to be happy in this place of solitude, you will acquire a great reputation for wisdom, and I know, by my own experience, that under the cloak of a great reputation it is possible to hide whole treasures of folly. Your father in his letters has told me all your story. While people think that you are giving heed to my instructions, you can talk to me about your Kalilah as much as you like, and without offending me in anyway. On the contrary, nothing affords me greater pleasure than to observe the movements of a heart abandoning itself to its youthful inclinations, and I shall be glad to see the bright colors of a first love mantling on young cheeks.”

While listening to this strange discourse, I kept my eyes on the ground, but the bird of hope fluttered in my bosom. At last I looked at the Sage, and his great red nose, that shone like a luminous point in that room of black marble, seemed to me less disagreeable. The smile accompanying my glance was of such significance that the Climber easily perceived I had swallowed his bait. This pleased him so mightily that he forgot his learned indolence, and ran to prepare a repast of which I stood greatly in need.

Scarcely had he departed, when Shaban came in, holding in his hand a letter, sealed with my father’s seal, which he had just opened. “Here,” said he, “are the instructions I was only to read when I reached this place; and I have read them only too clearly. Alas! how wretched it is to be the slave of a prince whose head has been turned by much learning! Unhappy princess! I am compelled, much against my will, to abandon you here. I must re-embark with all who have followed me hither, and only leave in your service the lame Mouzaka, who is deaf and dumb. The wretched Climber will be your only helper. Heaven alone knows what you will gain from his companionship. The Emir regards him as a prodigy of learning and wisdom; but as to this he must suffer a faithful Mussulman to have his doubts.” As he

spoke these words, Shaban touched the letter three times with his forehead, and then, leaping backwards, disappeared from my sight.

The hideous manner in which the poor eunuch wept on leaving me, amused me much. I was far indeed from making any attempt to keep him back. His presence was odious to me, for he always avoided all conversation about the only subject that filled my heart. On the other hand, I was enchanted at the choice of Mouzaka as my attendant. With a deaf and dumb slave, I should enjoy full liberty in imparting my confidences to the obliging old man, and in following his advice, if so be that he gave me advice of which I approved.

All my thoughts were thus assuming a somewhat rosy hue, when the Climber returned, smothered up in carpets and cushions of silk, which he stretched out on the ground; and he then proceeded, with a pleasant and contented air, to light torches, and to burn pastilles in braziers of gold. He had taken these sumptuous articles from the palace treasury, which, as he assured me, was well worthy of exciting my curiosity. I told him I was quite ready to take his word for it at that particular time, the smell of the excellent viands which had preceded him having very agreeably whetted my appetite. These viands consisted chiefly of slices of deer spiced with fragrant herbs, of eggs prepared after divers recipes, and of cakes more dainty and delicate than the petals of a white rose. There was besides a ruddy liquor, made of date juice, and served in strange translucent shells, and sparkling like the eyes of the Climber himself.

We lay down to our meal together in very friendly fashion. My amazing keeper greatly praised the quality of his wine, and made very good use of it, to the intense surprise of Mouzaka, who, huddled up in a corner, indulged in undescribable gestures which the marble reflected on all sides. The fire burnt gaily, throwing out sparks, which, as they darkened, exhaled an

exquisite perfume. The torches gave a brilliant light, the braziers shone brightly, and the soft warmth that reigned in the apartment inclined to a voluptuous indolence.

The situation in which I found myself was so singular, the kind of prison in which I was confined was so different from anything I could have imagined, and the ways of my keeper were so grotesque, that from time to time I rubbed my eyes to make sure that the whole thing was not a dream. I should even have derived amusement from my surroundings, if the thought that I was so far from Kalilah had left me for a single moment. The Climber, to distract my thoughts, began the marvelous story of the Giant Gebri, and the artful Charodé, but I interrupted him, and asked him to listen to the recital of my own real sorrows, promising that, afterwards, I should give ear to his tales. Alas! I never kept that promise. Vainly, at repeated intervals, did he try to excite my curiosity: I had none save with regard to Kalilah, and did not cease to repeat: "Where is he? What is he doing? When shall I see him again?"

The old man, seeing me so headstrong in my passion, and so well resolved to brave all remorse, became convinced that I was a fit object for his nefarious purposes, for, as my hearers will doubtless have already understood, he was a servant of the monarch who reigns in this place of torment. In the perversity of his soul, and that fatal blindness which makes men desire to find an entrance here, he had vowed to induce twenty wretches to serve Eblis, and he exactly wanted my brother and myself to complete that number. Far indeed was he, therefore, from really trying to stifle the yearnings of my heart; and though, in order to fan the flame that consumed me, he seemed from time to time, to be desirous of telling me stories, yet, in reality, his head was filled with quite other thoughts.

I spent a great part of the night in making my criminal avowals. Towards morning I fell asleep. The Climber did the same, at a few paces' distance, having first, without ceremony, applied to my forehead a kiss that burned me like a red-hot iron. My dreams were of the saddest. They left but a confused impression on my mind; but, so far as I can recollect, they conveyed the warnings of Heaven, which still desired to open before me a door of escape and of safety.

So soon as the sun had risen, the Climber led me into his woods, introduced me to his ostriches, and gave me an exhibition of his supernatural agility. Not only did he climb to the tremulous tops of the tallest and most slender palms, bending them beneath his feet like cars of corn, but he would dart like an arrow from one tree to another. After the display of several of these gymnastic feats, he settled on a branch, told me he was about to indulge in his daily meditations, and advised me to go with Mouzaka and bathe by the border of the stream, on the other side of the hill.

The heat was excessive. I found the clear waters cool and delicious. Bathing-pools, lined with precious marbles, had been hollowed out in the middle of a little level mead over which high rocks cast their shadow. Pale narcissi and gladioli grew on the margin, and, leaning towards the water, waved over my head. I loved these languid flowers, they seemed an emblem of my fortunes, and for several hours I allowed their perfumes to intoxicate my soul.

On returning to the palace, I found that the Climber had made great preparations for my entertainment. The evening passed like the evening before; and from day to day, pretty nearly after the same manner, I spent four months. Nor can I say that the time passed unhappily. The romantic solitude, the old man's patient attention, and the complacency with which he listened to love's foolish repetitions, all seemed to unite in soothing my

pain. I should perhaps have spent whole years in merely nursing those sweet illusions that are so rarely realized, have seen the ardor of my passion dwindle and die, have become no more than the tender sister and friend of Kalilah, if my father had not, in pursuit of his wild schemes, delivered me over to the impious scoundrel who sat daily watching at my side to make me his prey. Ah! Shaban! ah, Shamelah! you, my real friends, why was I torn from your arms? Why did you not, from the very first, perceive the germs of a too passionate tenderness existing in our hearts, germs which ought then and there to have been extirpated, since the day would come when not fire and steel would be of any avail!

One morning when I was steeped in sad thoughts, and expressing in even more violent language than usual my despair at being separated from Kalilah, the old man fixed upon me his piercing eyes, and addressed me in these words: "Princess, you, who have been taught by the most enlightened of Sages, cannot doubtless be ignorant of the fact that there are Intelligences, superior to the race of man, who take part in human affairs, and are able to extricate us from the greatest difficulties. I, who am telling you this, have had experience, more than once, of their power; for I had a right to their assistance, having been placed, as you yourself have been, under their protection from birth. I quite see that you cannot live without your Kalilah. It is time, therefore, that you should apply for aid to such helpful spirits. But will you have the strength of mind, the courage to endure the approach of Beings so different from mankind? I know that their coming produces certain inevitable effects, as internal tremors, the revulsion of the blood from its ordinary course; but I know also that these terrors, these revulsions, painful as they undoubtedly are, must appear as nothing compared with the mortal pain of separation from an object loved greatly and exclusively. If you resolve to invoke the Jinn of the Great Pyramid,

who, as I know, presided at your birth, if you are willing to abandon yourself to his care, I can, this very evening, give you speech of your brother, who is nearer than you imagine. The Being in question, so renowned among the Sages, is called Omoultakos: he is, at present, in charge of the treasure which the ancient cabalist kings have placed in this desert. By means of the other spirits under his command, he is in close touch with his sister, whom, by the by, he loved in his time just as you now love Kalilah. He will, therefore, enter into your sorrows just as much as I do myself, and will, I make no doubt, do all he can to further your desires.”

At these last words, my heart beat with unspeakable violence. The possibility of seeing Kalilah once again excited a transport in my breast. I rose hastily, and ran about the room like a mad creature. Then, coming back to the old man’s side, I embraced him, called him my father, and throwing myself at his knees, I implored him, with clasped hands, not to defer my happiness, but to conduct me, at whatever hazard, to the sanctuary of Omoultakos.

The crafty old scoundrel was well pleased, and saw with a malicious eye into what a state of delirium he had thrown me. His only thought was how to fan the flame thus kindled. For this purpose, he resumed a cold and reserved aspect, and said, in tones of great solemnity: “Be it known to you, Zulkaïs, that I have my doubts, and cannot help hesitating, in a matter of such importance, great as is my desire to serve you. You evidently do not know how dangerous is the step you propose to take; or, at least, you do not fully appreciate its extreme rashness. I cannot tell how far you will be able to endure the fearful solitude of the immeasurable vaults you must traverse, and the strange magnificence of the place to which I must conduct you. Neither can I tell in what shape the Jinn will appear. I have often seen him in a form so fearful that my senses have long remained numbed; at other

times he has shown himself under an aspect so grotesque that I have scarcely been able to refrain from choking laughter, for nothing can be more capricious than beings of that nature. Omoultakos, mayhap, will spare your weakness; but it is right to warn you that the adventure on which you are bound is perilous, that the moment of the Jinn's apparition is uncertain, that while you are waiting in expectation you must show neither fear nor horror, nor impatience, and that, at the sight of him, you must be very sure not to laugh, and not to cry. Observe, moreover, that you must wait in silence, and the stillness of death, and with your hands crossed over your breast, until he speaks to you, for a gesture, a smile, a groan, would involve not only your destruction, but also that of Kalilah, and my own."

"All that you tell me," I replied, "carries terror into my bosom; but, impelled by such a fatal love as mine, what would one not venture!"

"I congratulate you on your sublime perseverance," rejoined the Climber, with a smile of which I did not then appreciate the full significance and wickedness. "Prepare yourself. As soon as darkness covers the earth, I will go and suspend Mouzaka from the top of one of my highest palm-trees, so that she may not be in our way. I will then lead you to the door of the gallery that leads to the retreat of Omoultakos. There I shall leave you, and myself, according to my custom, go and meditate at the top of one of the trees, and make vows for the success of your enterprise."

I spent the interval in anxiety and trepidation. I wandered aimlessly amid the valleys and hillocks on the island. I gazed fixedly into the depths of the waters. I watched the rays of the sun declining over their surface, and looked forward, half in fear and half in hope, to the moment when the light should abandon our hemisphere. The holy calm of a serene night at last overspread the world.

I saw the Climber detach himself from a flock of ostriches that were gravely marching to drink at the river. He came to me with measured steps. Putting his finger to his lips, he said: "Follow me in silence."

I obeyed. He opened a door, and made me enter, with him, into a narrow passage, not more than four feet high, so that I was compelled to walk half doubled up. The air I breathed was damp and stifling. At every step I caught my feet in viscous plants that issued from certain cracks and crevices in the gallery. Through these cracks the feeble light of the moon's rays found an entrance, shedding light, every here and there, upon little wells that had been dug to right and left of our path. Through the black waters in these wells I seemed to see reptiles with human faces.

I turned away my eyes in horror. I burned with desire to ask the Climber what all this might mean, but the gloom and solemnity of his looks made me keep silence. He appeared to progress painfully, and to be brushing aside with his hands something to me invisible. Soon I was no longer able to see him at all. We were going, as it seemed, round and round in complete darkness; and, so as not to lose him altogether in that frightful labyrinth, I was compelled to lay hold upon his robe.

At last we reached a place where I began to breathe a freer and fresher air. A solitary taper of enormous size, fixed upright in a block of marble, lighted up a vast hall, and discovered to my eyes five staircases, whose banisters, made of different metals, faded upwards into the darkness. There we stopped, and the old man broke the silence, saying: "Chose between these staircases. One only leads to the treasury of Omoultakos. From the others, which go losing themselves to cavernous depths, you would never return. Where they lead you would find nothing but hunger, and the bones of those whom famine has aforetime destroyed."

Having said these words, he disappeared, and I heard a door closing behind him.

Judge of my terror, you who have heard the ebony portals, which confine us forever in this place of torment, grind upon their ebony hinges! Indeed, I dare to say that my position was, if possible, even more terrible than yours, for I was alone. I fell to the earth at the base of the block of marble. A sleep, such as that which ends our mortal existence, overcame my senses. Suddenly a voice, clear, sweet, insinuating like the voice of Kalilah, flattered my ears. I seemed, as in a dream, to see him on the staircase, the banisters of which were of brass. A majestic warrior, whose pale front bore a diadem, held him by the hand. “Zulkaïs,” said Kalilah, with an afflicted air, “Allah forbids our union. But Eblis, whom you see here, extends to us his protection. Implore his aid, and follow the path to which he points you.”

I awoke in a transport of courage and resolution, seized the taper, and began, without hesitation, to ascend the stairway with the brazen banisters. The steps seemed to multiply beneath my feet; but my resolution never faltered; and, at last, I reached a chamber, square, and immensely spacious, and paved with a marble that was of flesh color, and marked as with the veins and arteries of the human body. The walls of this place of terror were hidden by huge piles of carpets of a thousand kinds, and a thousand hues, and these moved slowly to and fro, as if painfully stirred by human creatures stifling beneath their weight. All around were ranged black chests, whose steel padlocks seemed encrusted with blood. Muffled hissings appeared to issue from under the lids of some of these chests; from others, groans and cries as of indistinct voices, and metallic clinkings. I thought that the voices were those of dives, or afrits, rather than men. I shuddered, and fled on, all the more precipitately because some of them had seemed to call me by name. The chamber was endless, and I saw that I had been

mistaken as to its form. It enlarged itself before me, like the perspectives of a hall of ill dreams. Insensibly, and as if by the operation of some enchantment, it assumed a more frightful aspect. The marble pavement was now of that livid color seen in the flesh of bodies after death, its veinings were dark as if blood had coagulated within them, and were interspersed with mottlings such as would be made on human skin by the contusions of iron maces. Columns, higher than the monumental pillars of the old kings of Egypt, rose round me into gloom that the great taper was unable to pierce. A blue mist, such as might ascend from nether gulfs, wavered like a curtain before the removed walls, and the light flickered woefully in my arms, as it met the dank sighing exhaled by the subterranean reaches.

I had need of all my resolution, and was forced to summon up the loved image of Kalilah, with all possible clearness, before I could proceed any further. The vastness of the room, its dismal character and furnishings, terrified me more and more. A weakness seized upon my limbs and senses, the taper became an almost insupportable burden, and I could scarce uplift it to inspect the curious treasures piled about me. Notwithstanding this, I perceived that there were open caskets, overrunning with divers jewels, with goldwork wrought in the fashion of antiquity, and still untarnished; so that I felt sure, at first, that I had reached the treasury of Omoultakos, the Jinn to whom the cabalist kings had entrusted their wealth. But soon doubt came upon me, as I began to note the hideous confusion that prevailed everywhere, the human finger-bones, and other charnel relics, that were heaped without discrimination amid the precious stones, or stored in separate vessels of graven silver, as if they too had been of rare worth. I saw, also, that some of the larger caskets were really sarcophagi, such as were used by the Egyptians. They had been brimmed with skulls, and the severed members of mummies, and gold coins. Serpents, milk-white, and

wholly scaleless, crept to and fro, bringing in their mouths bright jewels, or fragments of bone, which they deposited in certain receptacles that were not yet filled to the rim.

A faintness, such as the dying must undergo, would have overcome me at the sight of these horrors, and the musty odors which they emitted; but I was revived by an extraordinary apparition, which, through the speed and brilliance of its descent from one of the topless pillars, I took for a moment to be the Palm-tree-climber. The apparition reached the floor in a flash; it rose up, and I saw my mistake. It was almost more than I could do to refrain from bursting into wild laughter, for the uncommon personage before me resembled, as much as anything else, a mangy baboon whose hair had fallen out in broad patches. His head and face, indeed, were altogether hairless, like those of the ancient priests, but the brows had been painted with kohl to relieve their blank appearance, and the same cosmetic had been applied in large mouches about the jowls. He carried at his side, from a girdle of human gut, a capacious and somewhat tattered pouch, in the form of a stomach sac, from whose rifts unmentionable objects protruded. More amazing than all this, however, was the long tail, seeming to be on fire perpetually, which the remarkable being flourished in my face like a torch.

Recalling the injunctions of the Climber, I succeeded in smothering my mirth, and maintained a strict silence. It was well, no doubt, that I did so. Omoultakos, for it was indeed the Jinn himself, addressed me in a hollow and lugubrious voice that accorded somewhat strangely with his aspect, saying: "Princess, you need carry no longer the immense taper whose weight has grown so burdensome to you. My tail, which burns with inexhaustible fire, will now serve as a flambeau for us both."

He indicated a half-empty sarcophagus, in which, with expressive signs, he told me to deposit the taper, leaving it upright, so that the grease would

not gutter upon the rare contents of that reliquary. Then he said to me: "As a fitting reward for your perseverance in daring the shadows of the subterranean labyrinth, I shall show you the many treasures which have been amassed in this chamber, during the eras of my custodianship. To the wealth of the cabalist rulers, in itself quite prodigious, I have since added much that I prize peculiarly. Eblis, it is true, in his deep-lying halls, has been able to gather together a far more inclusive assortment of terrestrial riches; but I venture to assert that my collection, in some ways, is a little choicer than his. For example, in this casket, you behold, among other remnants of former delight and beauty, a thigh-bone that once belonged to Balkis."

He waved his tail, which flared brightly, above the relic in question, and then, with a ludicrous and proprietary air, passed on to others. At one time, during our tour, he paused before a small box of green bronze, filled with a dark brown powder, and lifting a pinch of the powder to his nostrils, gave vent to prolonged and violent sternutations. When these had ceased, he remarked with much satisfaction: "There is, to my knowledge, no sneezing-powder more efficacious than the one I have just employed, which was obtained through the atomizing of the mummies of antique embalmers."

My astonishment and disgust were mingled with a strange propensity to laughter, which I conquered again and yet again, with much difficulty. Omoultakos, in a most extensive circuit of inspection about the chamber, illumined for me with the unfailing light of his appendage, an infinite variety of objects that testified to mortal corruption. All the while, he discoursed upon their quondam ownership, and their history, in a fashion that was no less proud than funereal. He showed me, moreover, certain musical instruments, which he himself had designed during hours of leisure. Among them, I remember that there were lutes fashioned from the ribs and

arm-bones of women, and stringed with male sinews, and also there were tabors of human skin, that had a deep sonority. On more than one of these instruments, he played a while for my diversion, and though I thought the airs he extorted from them were more than atrocious, I felt that it would be politic to commend, rather than criticize, his playing. In the meanwhile, I burned with desire to question him regarding the whereabouts of Kalilah, and the means through which we might again be united; but mindful of all that the Climber had told me, I restrained my eagerness.

At last, Omoultakos, who had led me on for a great distance between the columns, and the sarcophagi, and had laid aside his unusual instruments of music, turned on me, and said: "Think not, O princess, that all my treasures are things which have come down from antiquity. In the recesses of this unfathomable chamber, objects of more recent date are also conserved. One of them, at least, will interest you. Be patient, and follow the illumination of my tail."

With this adjuration, he conducted me to an open sarcophagus, gilded, and carved from end to end with hieroglyphics, that stood a little apart from the others. In it, with unutterable horror and anguish, I discerned the form of Kalilah, lying as if dead, with a mortal pallor on his cheeks, and lips, and eyelids. I noted that the bosom of his raiment was torn and bloody. I hurled myself upon him, and sought to revive him with kisses, but in vain.

Omoultakos, at this point, chose to interrupt my efforts by inserting the agile tip of his combustive tail between myself and the face of Kalilah. He observed, in a severe tone: "There is but one way in which the prince, your beloved brother, can be revived. The method, fortunately, lies at my immediate disposal. First, however, I will explain to you the presence of Kalilah in this place. The Emir Abou Taber Achmed, in attempting to continue the heroic education he designed for your brother, sent him forth

with a small retinue the other day, to hunt the ferocious lions of the Nubian Desert. These lions, appearing in unwonted number, and with more than their usual rapacity, disposed of the followers of Kalilah, and would have served the prince in like manner, if some of my subordinate Jinns, who were watching over the expedition, had not intervened. Unluckily, they were too late to keep Kalilah from being wounded almost to death by the talons of the beasts. They brought him here, only a few hours since, and I have permitted him to occupy the sarcophagus of an elder Pharaoh, though my wisdom has told me that the tenancy will be of brief duration, and that Kalilah can not be numbered among my permanent acquisitions. If you, Zulkais, will consent to a very simple matter, I will give into your hand, without delay, a supremely sovereign restorative."

"Anything! Anything!" I cried, wildly. "I consent to whatever you ask, if only Kalilah be brought back to life.

"You need promise only one thing," quoth Omoultakos. "Pledge your fealty to Eblis, the lord of the fiery globe, and the shadowy caverns.

"It is pledged," I replied, hastily. "Give me the restorative."

Omoultakos, with his apish fingers, began to fumble in the tattered pouch that hung at his girdle. I caught sight of certain highly nauseating oddments, from among which, presently, he produced a pale yellow fruit, having somewhat the form and size of a peach, and laid it in the palm of my hand.

"This fruit," he informed me, "was grown in a garden which, without ever having beheld the sun, is more fertile than the gardens of Irem. If you squeeze it very gently above the lips of Kalilah, a single drop of its juice, falling down upon them, will suffice to resuscitate him in all the bloom that you have loved so dearly. The fruit, after that, is yours to retain; but I trust that you will not be so careless as to devour it at any future time. If you

were to do this, the results would be very surprising, since the action of the juice on those who languish at the gates of death, and those who exult in the fulness of life, is an altogether different thing.”

Scarcely heeding any of his words, I hastened to squeeze the yellow fruit above Kalilah’s lips, which were white as those of a cadaver. I was transported with joy when a living ruby returned into them beneath the dripping of the fluid, and the eyes of Kalilah opened, to give back my ardent gaze. He lifted his arms from the sarcophagus to embrace me, and I quite forgot the presence of Omoultakos. That personage, after a decorous interval, observed in a loud voice: “I am sorry to break in upon your reunion, since I cannot do otherwise than approve and admire the fervor which animates you, but it is more than probable that I shall have, before long, another use for the receptacle you are both occupying. For that reason, I shall conduct you to an alcove beyond my treasury. This alcove is fitted with comfortable couches that will serve your purpose fully as well.”

Kalilah, rearing his head at the sound of Omoultakos’ voice, perceived, for the first time, the remarkable baboon, who had hitherto been screened from his view by my bosom. He, in his turn, was no less amazed than I had been. However, heeding the injunction of our host, he got up from the sarcophagus. In low tones, I begged him to repress the injudicious laughter that quivered visibly upon his countenance. We both followed Omoultakos. As we went, I placed the yellow fruit in the bosom of my garment.

Kalilah, more impressed by the person of our guide than by the doleful surroundings, could not forbear commenting on the igneous properties of the tail, which emitted showers of sparks on the gloom, as the owner flourished it in his progress. He remarked to me, in great wonder, that the baboon seemed to experience no discomfort whatever from this unique process of combustion. Omoultakos, who had overheard him, turned and

said: "Know, young prince, that it is the nature of my tail to burn in this manner, and the sensation it affords me is, in its degree, no more painful, or extraordinary, than that which women experience from the flushing of their cheeks, or men from an excitement of the blood."

After a journey that appeared brief indeed, and which I could not reconcile with my former impression of the vastness of the chamber, we came to an open portal. The flambeau of Omoultakos, reared aloft, illumined for us a much smaller room, with couches of golden cloth, and dark draperies. My father would have loved the draperies, since they were entirely covered with hieroglyphics; but the hieroglyphics, which appeared to change altogether from moment to moment, would have maddened the Sages whom he employed. Here the Jinn left us, after lighting with his torch the many lamps of brass, and copper censers, with which the room had been supplied. I thought that this departure was attended by an odd lack of ceremony, but recalled that he had come down from the pillar, on the occasion of his appearance before me, in a manner no less informal. Through the open doorway, Kalilah and I continued, for some time, to see the luminosity that he made in his movements about the treasury. He seemed to be very busy, and we caught glimpses of certain peculiar assistants, who were bringing in a new lot of treasures. But our joy in being together once more, preoccupied us so fully, that we paid little heed to these activities, and were enabled to disregard, for the time being, their somewhat sinister import.

Between our caresses, we asked each other a thousand questions, and told all that had happened to us severally, since the date of our separation. Kalilah was much dismayed when he learned the circumstances of my visit to the underground palace, and the promise I had made, on his behalf, to the Jinn. "Alas!" he said, "I fear that all this has been prearranged, and for no

good purpose. The lions who attacked me were of supernatural size and fierceness. No doubt they were the very Jinns of whom Omoultakos told you, and after their talons had slain my followers, and had rendered me senseless, they brought me here. You, Zulkaïs, through your affection for me, have entered the trap. However, let us try to forget this. No matter how dark and precarious our situation, we have at least the consolation of each other's society."

"All that I have done was nothing," I replied. "Gladly would I pledge myself to Eblis a thousand times, for your sake."

In such converse, the hours went by, and we began to wonder at the long absence of Omoultakos, who had vanished after a while among the pillars of the treasury, and had not returned. He had left us without declaring his intentions as to our future destiny, and it seemed that he had forgotten us. Moreover, he had made no provision for us, beyond lighting the lamps and censers. By the illumination that these vessels yielded, we began to remark the moth-holes in the figured hangings, and the great age of the couches, whose coverings might have been exhumed from palaces long buried in the desert sand. We noted, also, that the lamps and censers were overspread with verdigris. The fumes of the latter vessels troubled us, being both musty and aromatic, like the balms that exhale from the cerements of the Pharaohs. We heard, at intervals, equivocal and disquieting sounds, in a direction of which we were not sure. Together with all this, I grew faint with hunger, but there were no viands in the room for my regalement. At last, I remembered the fruit which I had placed in my bosom, after using it to revive Kalilah. Forgetful of the warning of the Jinn, I drew it forth. I would have shared it with Kalilah, but he, noting my hunger, declined. I devoured it greedily, finding a strange and spicy savor in its pulp.

Almost immediately, I experienced a feeling of unbearable heat, an intense ardor of life rose within me, as if it would burst the confines of my heart. The chamber seemed to blaze with a light that was not that of the lamps. My senses burned with a confused delirium of desires, a madness possessed me, and Kalilah was lost to my perception, like the shadows of the apartment. Then I thought that a ball of fire, hued with a thousand colors that changed momentarily, swam up and floated before me in the air. An extravagant longing seized me, to possess the ball, and I sprang to my feet and tried to clasp it, but the globe eluded me, and fled swiftly, and I, without heeding the cries of Kalilah, pursued it. I ran through a small portal at the rear of the chamber, and down a labyrinth of cavernous corridors, which, save for the illumination of the globe, would have been altogether lightless. Intent only on overtaking the bright ball, I did not notice my surroundings, or the route I followed. At last, the light disappeared, leaving only a dim glimmer, like the afterglow of the sunken sun, and I came to the verge of a precipice. Far below, the ball receded, plunging into abysses from which the dismal and eternal roaring of lost waters came up to arrest me. However, in my delirium, I should still have followed the globe, if it had not seemed, after an interval, to return toward me from the depths. I waited, ready to seize it, but, as the light drew nearer, I perceived its true source. It was Omoultakos, climbing nimbly from the gulf, by means of the slight projections of the stone.

In an instant, he stood beside me, and said, with an air of reproof: “Princess, why this haste to fling yourself into the underground river that flows eternally toward the realms of Eblis? The destined hour of your departure thither, borne by that doleful tide, is not yet at hand. Fortunately, I met your brother, who was seeking you in the darkness of the caverns; and, learning what had happened, I came without delay, by another route than

yours, to intercept you. Kalilah, in consideration of this act of succor, has plighted himself to the prince of the fiery globe, and the flaming hearts. Let us rejoin him, for I fear that he still wanders, lost and distracted, in the darkness. In a sense, I am to blame for what has occurred. Carried away by the duties of my custodianship of the treasury — duties that are often exigent — I forgot the obligations of a host, and failed to provide for your natural needs. If I had done as I should, hunger would never have prompted you to devour the fruit that gave rise to your delirium.”

My madness had abated. I followed Omoultakos, perceiving, as I went, the horrors of the labyrinth of caverns, to which the orb with the thousand colors had blinded me. At every turn, there were scattered bones, and skeletons, which had belonged, mayhap, to wretches who had lost themselves in the maze, and had perished of famine. Some of the skeletons lay close together, but I could not tell whether the intimacy of their postures had been dictated by human love, or anthropophagism. Omoultakos did not enlighten me upon this point, nor did I care to question him. At last, we found Kalilah, whose joy was little less extravagant than the delirium which had led me to the floating ball.

“I must provide more adequately for your entertainment,” said Omoultakos. “Eblis permits me to keep you here a while, as my guests. My subterranean garden lies not far away, and in it is a pavilion, which you may occupy. Food and drink will be served regularly to you, and in plenteous quantities, and I trust that neither of you will be tempted, in view of what has occurred, to sample the fruit of my trees.”

He conducted us along a short passage, from which we emerged into an immense cavern whose roof was purple like the vault of night, and was starred with effulgent ores that resembled the planets and the constellations. Here we beheld the garden of which he had spoken. It consisted of fantastic

trees, heavily laden with divers fruits and blossoms and cunningly illumed by lamps, which, very often, I could not distinguish from the fruits. In the midst was a small pavilion, built of a marble mottled with rose and black. It was furnished with luxurious divans, and a table on which delicious viands, and wines like molten ruby and topaz, had been spread for our refection. Omoultakos, after again assuring us of his hospitality, begged leave to excuse himself, and departed with the same celerity that had marked his former movements.

In the pavilion he had placed at our disposal, Kalilah and I dwelt for a period of time that neither of us could calculate. That period, however, in spite of certain forebodings, was the happiest we had known, since our childhood days when the Emir was still content to leave us together without interruption. In that place, there was no difference between day and night: for the lamps burned eternally amid the fruited foliage, and the star-like ores continued to sparkle ever in the vault above us. Often we wandered through the garden, which had a strange beauty, though we did not care, after certain indiscreet delvings, to examine too closely into its hidden particulars. The odors of the blossoms, richer than myrrh and santal, conduced to an agreeable languor; and since the Jinn supplied us with an infinity of savorous foods, and wines more delicate than those of Persia, we were well content to leave his fruits alone. In the happiness of being together, and in transports renewed perpetually, we almost forgot the rash pledges we had given. Nor were we troubled overmuch by the fact that the attendants who served us were invisible, and gave proof of their presence only by a sound that resembled the noise made by the flittering of great bats. Also, for the most part, we found ourselves able to ignore a sullen roaring that pervaded the garden continually, seeming to issue from subterranean waters, at a vague distance, and in a direction of which we were never sure. Indeed, we

became so accustomed to the sound, mournful and menacing though it was, that it seemed to us little more than a quality of the silence in which we were sequestered.

Our host, who was no doubt busily engaged with the care of his acquisitions, and the treasure confided to him by the cabalist rulers, failed to visit us again. We remarked his negligence, but under the circumstances, we did not miss him.

Alas! though we knew it not, or strove to forget it, the malign forces of our destiny were always at work. Our sojourn in the garden of Omoultakos was to have a frightful denouement. By virtue of the allegiance we had both pledged to the Lord of Evil, we were to share, at the appointed time, the fate of all others who have thus damned themselves irretrievably. And yet — in order to live again those happy hours — I, and Kalilah, too, would repeat the same bond without hesitation. Dream not that we repent.

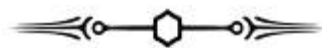
We were plighting other vows, as we had done a thousand times, and were seated upon a divan in the pavilion, when the date of perdition arrived. It came without announcement, save an insupportable thunder, that seemed to rive apart the foundations of the world. We were tossed as if by earthquake, the air darkened around us, and the ground gave way. Clapsed in each other's arms, we had the sensation of falling, together with the pavilion, into a deep abyss. The thunder ceased, the vertigo of our descent grew less, and we heard on every side the woeful and furious noise of rushing waters. A melancholy glimmering dawned about us, and by it, we saw the pavilion had become a raft of serpents plaited together in the fashion of reeds, that was borne headlong on a dark tumultuous river. The serpents, large and rigid as beams of wood, had preserved on their skins the black and rosy mottling of the marble, and they had formed themselves into

a cabin around us, like the superstructure of the pavilion. As we went, they added a loud and sinister hissing to the sound of the driven waters.

In this horrible manner, we were carried through unfathomable caves, ever deeper, toward the accursed realms of Eblis. Night surrounded us, we beheld no longer the least ray or glimmer, and, clasped tightly in each other's embrace, we sought by means of such contact to mitigate the noisome clamminess of the reptiles, and the terror of our situation. Thus we seemed to go on for a length of time that was equivalent to many days.

At last, a light broke upon us, lurid and doleful, and the clamor of the river deepened, with a thunder of mighty waterfalls before us. We thought surely that the torrent would precipitate us over some fatal verge, but at this point, the serpents of our raft began to exert themselves, and swimming vigorously, they landed us in the halls of Eblis, not far from that place where the Sultan Soliman listens eternally to the tumult of the cataract, and waits for the release that will come to him only with its cessation. After that, preserving no longer the form of a raft, they re-entered the stream, and swam back separately, in the direction of the garden of Omoultakos. Now, lord, we await, even as you, the moment when our hearts shall be kindled with the unconsuming fire, and shall burn brightly as the tail of the baboon — but, alas! shall derive unutterable anguish, like the hearts of all other mortals, from that flame in which is the ecstasy of demons.

Chinoiserie



LING YANG, THE poet, sits all day in his hut among the willows by the river-side, and dreams of the Lady Moy. Spring and the swallows have returned from the timeless isles of myrrh and amaranth, further than the flight of sails in the unknown south; the silver buds of the willow are breaking into gold; and reeds of venal jade have begun to push their way among the brown and yellow rushes of yesteryear. But Ling Yang is heedless of the brightening azure, the light that lengthens: and he has no eye for the northward flight of the waterfowl, and the passing of the last clouds, that melt and vanish in the flames of an amber sunset. For him, there is no season save the moon of waning summer in which he first met the Lady Moy. But a sorrow deeper than the sorrow of autumn abides in his heart; for the heart of Moy is colder to him than the snows of great mountains above a tropic valley: and all the songs he has made for her, the songs of the flute and the songs of the lute, have found no favour in her hearing.

Leagues away, in her pavilion of scarlet lacquer and ebony, the Lady Moy reclines on a couch of sapphire-coloured silk. All day, through the gathering gold of the willow-foliage, she watches the placid lake, on whose surface the pale green lilly-pads have begun to widen, Beside her, in a turquoise-studded binding, there lie the verses of the poet Ling Yung, who lived six centuries ago, and who sang in all his songs the praise of the Lady Loy, who disdained him. Moy has no need to peruse them any longer, for they live in her memory even as upon the written page. And, sighing, she dreams ever of the great poet, Ling Yung, and of the melancholy romance that inspired his songs, and wonders enviously at the disdain of the Lady Loy.

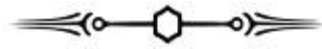
The Mirror in the Hall of Ebony



FROM THE NETHERMOST profound of slumber, from a gulf beyond the sun and stars that illumine the Lethean shoals and the vague lands of somnolent visions, I floated on a black unrippling tide to the dark threshold of a dream. And in this dream I stood at the end of a long hall that was ceiled and floored and walled with black ebony, and was lit with a light that fell not from the sun or moon nor from any lamp. The hall was without doors or windows, and at the further extreme an oval mirror was framed in the wall. And standing there, I remembered nothing of all that had been; and the other dreams of sleep, and the dream of birth and of everything thereafter, were alike forgotten. And forgotten too was the name I had found among men, and the other names whereby the daughters of dream had known me; and memory was no older than my coming to that hall. But I wondered not, nor was I troubled thereby, and naught was strange to me: for the tide that had borne me to this threshold was the tide of Lethe.

Anon, though I knew not why, my feet were drawn adown the hall, and I approached the oval mirror. And in the mirror I beheld the haggard face that was mine, and the red mark on the cheek where one I loved had struck me in her anger, and the mark on the throat where her lips had kissed me in amorous devotion. And, seeing this, I remembered all that had been; and the other dreams of sleep, and the dream of birth and of everything thereafter, alike returned to me. And thus I recalled the name I had assumed beneath the terrene sun, and the names I had borne beneath the suns of sleep and of reverie. And I marvelled much, and was enormously troubled, and all things were most strange to me, and all things were as of yore.

The Passing of Aphrodite



IN ALL THE lands of Illarion, from mountain-valleys rimmed with unmelting snow, to the great cliffs of sand whose reflex darkens a sleepy, tepid sea, were lit as of old the green and amethyst fires of summer. Spices were on the wind that mountaineers had met in the high glaciers; and the eldest wood of cypress, frowning on a sky-clear bay, was illumined by scarlet orchids... But the heart of the poet Phaniol was an urn of black jade overfraught by love with sodden ashes, with unmelting snow, to the great cliffs of sard whose reflex And because he wished to forget for a time the mockery of myrtles, Phaniol walked alone in the waste bordering upon Illarion; in a place that great fires had blackened long ago, and which knew not the pine or the violet, the cypress or the myrtle. There, as the day grew old, he came to an unsailed ocean, whose waters were dark and still under the falling sun, and bore not the memorial voices of other seas. And Phaniol paused, and lingered upon the ashen shore; and dreamt awhile of that sea whose name is Oblivion.

Then, from beneath the westering sun, whose bleak light was prone on his forehead, a barge appeared and swiftly drew to the land: albeit there was no wind, and the oars hung idly on the foamless wave. And Phaniol saw that the barge was wrought of ebony fretted with curious anaglyphs, and carved with luxurious forms of gods and beasts, of satyrs and goddesses and women; and the figurehead was a black Eros with full unsmiling mouth and implacable sapphire eyes averted, as if intent upon things not lightly to be named or revealed. Upon the deck of the barge were two women, one pale as the northern moon, and the other swart as equatorial midnight. But both

were clad imperially, and bore the mien of goddesses or of those who dwell near to the goddesses. Without word or gesture, they regarded Phaniol; and, marvelling, he inquired, 'What seek ye?'

Then, with one voice that was like the voice of hesperian airs among palms at evening twilight in the Fortunate Isles, they answered, saying:

'We wait the goddess Aphrodite, who departs in weariness and sorrow from Illarion, and from all the lands of this world of petty loves and pettier mortalities. Thou, because thou art a poet, and hast known the great sovereignty of love, shall behold her departure. But they, the men of the court, the marketplace and the temple, shall receive no message nor sign of her going-forth, and will scarcely dream that she is gone... Now, O Phaniol, the time, the goddess and the going-forth are at hand.'

Even as they ceased, One came across the desert; and her coming was a light on the far hills; and where she trod the lengthening shadows shrunk, and the grey waste put on the purple asphodels and the deep verdure it had worn when those queens were young, that now are a darkening legend and a dust of mummia. Even to the shore she came and stood before Phaniol, while the sunset greatened, filling sky and sea with a flush as of new-blown blossoms, or the inmost rose of that coiling shell which was consecrate to her in old time. Without robe or circlet or garland, crowned and clad only with the sunset, fair with the dreams of man but fairer yet than all dreams: thus she waited, smiling tranquilly, who in life or death, despair or rapture, vision or flesh, to gods and poets and galaxies unknowable. But, filled with a wonder that was also love, or much more than love, the poet could find no greeting.

'Farewell, O Phaniol,' she said, and her voice was the sighing of remote waters, the murmur of waters moon-withdrawn, forsaking not without sorrow a proud island tall with palms. 'Thou hast known me and

worshipped all thy days till now, but the hour of my departure is come: I go, and when I am gone, thou shalt worship still and shalt not know me. For the destinies are thus, and not forever to any man, to any world or to any god, is it given to possess me wholly. Autumn and spring will return when I am past, the one with yellow leaves, the other with yellow violets; birds will haunt the renewing myrtles; and many little loves will be thine. Not again to thee or to any man will return the perfect vision and the perfect flesh of the goddess.'

Ending thus, she stepped from that ashen strand to the dark prow of the barge; and even as it had come, without wafture of wind or movement of oar, the barge put out on a sea covered with the fallen fading petals of sunset. Quickly it vanished from view, while the desert lost those ancient asphodels and the deep verdure it had worn again for a little. Darkness, having conquered Illarion, came slow and furtive on the path of Aphrodite; shadows mustered innumeraably to the grey hills and the heart of the poet Phaniol was an urn of black jade overfraught by love with sodden ashes.

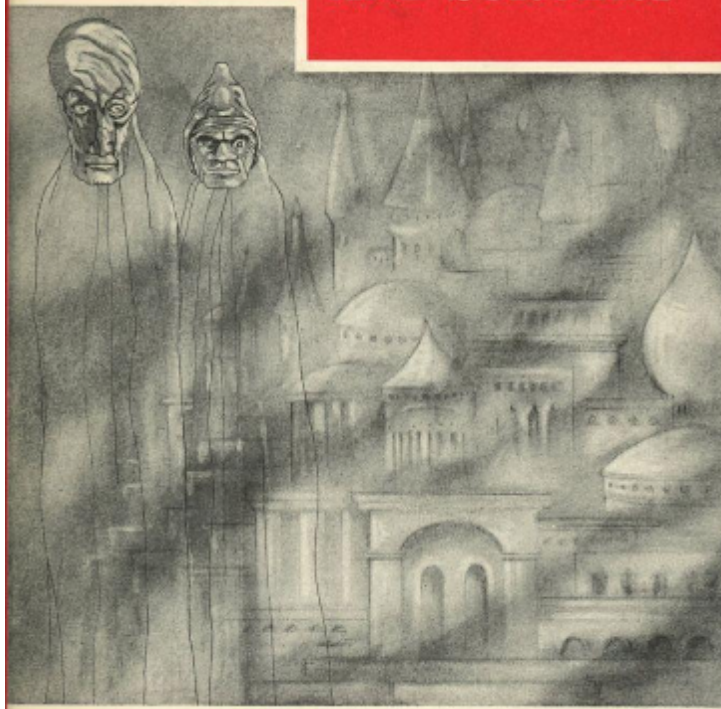
Tales of Science and Sorcery (1964)



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TALES OF SCIENCE AND SORCERY

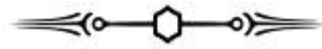


CLARK ASHTON SMITH

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The first edition

The Great God Awto



PROFESSOR SAGGUS TURNS Back the Clock and Watches the Wheels of Progress Grind Fine!

Class-room lecture given by the Most Honorable Erru Saggus, Professor of Hamurriquanean Archaeology at the World-University of Toshtush, on the 365th day of the year 5998.

Males, females, androgynes and neuters of the class in archaeology, you have learned, from my previous lectures, all that is known or inferred concerning the crudely realistic art and literature of the ancient Hamurriquanes. With some difficulty, owing to the fragmentary nature of the extant remains, I have reconstructed for you their bizarre and hideous buildings, their rude mechanisms.

Also, you are now familiar with the unimaginably clumsy, corrupt and inefficient legal and economic systems that prevailed among them, together with the garblings of crass superstition and scant knowledge that bore the sacred names of the sciences. You have listened, not without amusement, to my account of their ridiculous amatory and social customs, and have heard with horror the unutterable tale of their addiction to all manner of violent crimes.

Today I shall speak regarding a matter that throws into even grosser relief the low-grade barbarism, the downright savagery, of this bloody and besotted people.

Needless to say, my lecture will concern their well nigh universal cult of human sacrifice and self-immolation to the god Awto: a cult which many of

my confreres have tried to associate with the worship of the Heendouan deity, Yokkurnudd, or Jukkernot. In this cult, the wild religious fanaticism of the Hamurriquanes, together with the national blood-lust for which they were notorious, found its most congenial and spacious outlet.

If we grant the much-disputed relationship between Awto and Yokkurnudd, it seems plain that the latter god was an extremely mild and refined variation of Awto, worshipped by a gentler and more advanced people. The rites done to Yokkurnudd were localized and occasional while the sacrifices required by Awto took place at all hours on every street and highway.

However, in the face of certain respected authorities, I am inclined to doubt if the two religions had much in common. Certainly nothing apart from the ritual usage of crushing the sacrificial victims under the wheels of ponderous earth-vehicles, such as you have seen in our museums among the exhumed relics of antiquity.

It is my fond hope that I shall eventually find evidence to confirm this doubt, and thus vindicate the Heendouans of the blackest charge that legend and archaeology have brought against them. I shall have made a worthy contribution to science if I can show that they were among the few ancient peoples who were never tainted by the diabolic cult of Awto originating in Hamurriquia.

Because of a religion so barbarous, it has sometimes been argued that the Hamurriquanean culture — if one can term it such — must have flourished at an earlier period in man's development than the Heendouan. However, in dealing with a realm of research that borders upon prehistory, such relative chronology can be left to theorists.

Excepting, of course, in our own superior modern civilization, human progress has been slow and uncertain, with many intercalated Dark Ages,

many reversions to partial or total savagery. I believe that the Hamurriquanean epoch, whether prior to that of the Heendouans or contemporary with it, can well be classified as one of these Dark Ages.

To return to my main theme, the cult of Awto. It is doubtless well known to you that in recent years certain irresponsible so-called archaeologists, misled by a desire to create sensation at the cost of truth, have fathered the fantastic thesis that there never was any such god as Awto. They believe, or profess to believe, that the immolatory vehicles of the ancients, and the huge destruction of life and limb caused by their use, were quite without religious significance.

A premise so absurd could be maintained only by madmen or charlatans. I mention it merely that I may refute and dismiss it with all the contempt that it deserves.

Of course, I cannot deny the dubiousness of some of our archaeological deductions. Great difficulties have attended our researches in the continent-embracing deserts of Hamurriqua, where all food-supplies and water must be transported for thousands of miles.

The buildings and writings of the ancients, often made of the most ephemeral materials, lie deep in ever-drifting sands that no human foot has trod for millenniums. Therefore, it is small wonder that guesswork must sometimes fill the gaps of precise knowledge.

I can safely say, however, that few of our deductions are so completely proven, so solidly based, as those relating to the Awto cult. The evidence, though largely circumstantial, is overwhelming.

Like most religions, it would seem that this cult was obscure and shadowy in its origin. Legend and history have both lost the name of the first promulgator. The earliest cars of immolation were slow and clumsy, and the rite of sacrifice was perhaps rarely and furtively practised in the

beginning. There is no doubt, too, that the intended victims often escaped. Awto, at first, can hardly have inspired the universal fear and reverence of later epochs.

Certain scraps of Hamurriquanean printing, miraculously preserved in air-tight vaults and deciphered before they could crumble, have given us the names of two early prophets of Awto, Anriford and Dhodzh. These amassed fortunes from the credulity of their benighted followers. It was under the influence of these prophets that the dark and baleful religion spread by leaps and bounds, until no Hamurriquanean street or highway was safe from the thunderously rolling wheels of the sacrificial cars.

It is doubtful whether Awto, like most other savage and primordial deities, was ever represented by graven images. At least, no such images have been recovered in all our delvings. However, the rusty remains of the iron-built temples of Awto, called *grahges*, have been exhumed everywhere in immense numbers.

Strange vessels and metal implements of mysterious hieratic use have been found in the *grahges*, together with traces of oils by which the sacred vehicles were anointed, and the vehicles lie buried in far-spread, colossal scrapheaps. All this, however, throws little light on the deity himself.

It is probable that Awto, sometimes known as Mhotawr, was simply an abstract principle of death and destruction and was believed to manifest himself through the homicidal speed and fury of the fatal machines. His demented devotees flung themselves before these vehicles as before the embodiment of the god.

The power and influence of Awto's priesthood, as well as its numbers, must have been well nigh beyond estimation. The priesthood, it would seem, was divided into at least three orders:

The *mekniks*, or keepers of the *grahges*. The *shophurs*, who drove the sacred vehicles. And an order — whose special name has been lost — that served as guardians of innumerable wayside shrines. It was at these shrines where a mineral liquid called *ghas*, used in the fuelling of the vehicles, was dispensed from crude and curious pumping mechanisms.

Several well preserved mummies of *mekniks*, in sacerdotal raiment blackened by the sacred oils, have been recovered from *grahges* in the central Hamurriquanean deserts, where they were apparently buried by sudden sandstorms.

Chemical analysis of the oiled garments has so far failed to confirm a certain legendary belief current among the degenerate bushmen who form the scant remnant of Hamurriqua's teaming myriads. I refer to a belief that the oils used in anointing those ancient cars were often mixed with unctuous matters obtained from the bodies of their victims.

However, a usage so barbarous would have conformed well enough with the principles of the hideous cult. Further research may establish the old legend as a truth.

From the evidence we have unearthed, it is plain that the cult assumed enormous power and wide-spread proportions within a few decades of its inception. The awful apex was reached in little more than a century. In my opinion, it is no coincidence that the whole period of the Awto cult corresponded very closely with Hamurriqua's decline and ultimate downfall.

Some will consider my statements too definite, and will ask for the evidence above mentioned. In answer, I need only point to the condition of those skeletons exhumed by thousands from tombs and vaults dated according to the Hamurriquanean chronology.

Throughout the time-period we have assigned to the Awto cult there is a steady, accelerative increase of bone-fractures, often of the most horribly complicated nature. Toward the end, when the fearful cult was at its height, we find few skeletons that do not show at least one or two minor, if not major, breakages.

The shattered condition of these skeletons, often decapitated or wholly disarticulated, is almost beyond belief.

The rusty remains of the ancient vehicles bear similar witness. Built with an eye to ever greater speed and deadliness, they fall into types that show the ghastly growth and progress of the cult. The later types, found in prodigious numbers, are always more or less dented, broken, crumpled — often they are mere heaps of indescribably tangled wreckage.

Toward the end, it would seem that virtually the whole population must have belonged to the blood-mad priesthood. Going forth daily in the rituals of Awto, they must have turned their cars upon each other, hurtling together with the violence of projectiles. A universal mania for speed went hand in hand with a mania for homicide and suicide.

Picture, if you can, the ever-mounting horror of it all. The nation-wide madness of immolation. The carnivals of bloody holidays. The highways lined from coast to coast with crushed and dismembered sacrifices!

Can you wonder that this ancient people, their numbers decimated, their mentality sapped and bestialized by dire superstition, should have declined so rapidly? Should have fallen almost without a struggle before the hordes of the Orient?

Let history and archaeology draw the curtain. The moral is plain. But luckily, in our present state of high enlightenment, we have little need to fear the rise of any savage error such as that which attended the worship of Awto.

Obituary item broadcast from Toshtush on the 1st day of the year 5999:

We are sorry to record the sudden death of Professor Erru Saggus, who had just delivered the last of his series of lectures on Hamurriquanean Archaeology at the University of Toshtush.

Returning on the same afternoon to his home in the Himalayas, Professor Saggus was the victim of a most unfortunate accident. His stratosphere ship, one of the very newest and speediest models, collided within a few leagues of its destination with a ship driven by one Jar Ghoshtar, a chemistry student from the great College of Ustraleendia.

Both ships were annihilated by the impact, plunging earthward in a single flaming meteoric mass which ignited and destroyed an entire Himalayan village. Several hundred people are said to have burned to death in the resultant conflagration.

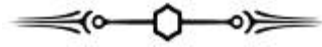
Such accidents are all too frequent nowadays, owing to the crowded condition of stratosphere traffic. We must deplore the recklessness of navigators who exceed the 950 mile speed limit. All who saw the recent accident bear witness that Erru Saggus and Jar Ghoshtar were both driving at a speed very much in excess of 1000 miles per hour.

While regretting this present-day mania for mere mileage, we cannot agree with certain ill-advised satirists who have tried to draw a parallel between the fatalities of modern traffic and the ancient rites of immolation to the god Awto.

Superstition is one thing, Science is another. Such archaeologists as Professor Saggus have proven to us that the worshippers of Awto were the victims of a dark and baleful error. It is unthinkable that such superstition will ever again prevail. With pride for our achievements, and full confidence in the future, we can number the Most Honorable Professor Erru Saggus among the martyrs of Science.

The Immortals of Mercury

I



CLIFF HOWARD'S FIRST sensation, as he came back to consciousness, was one of well-nigh insufferable heat. It seemed to beat upon him from all sides in a furnace-like blast and to lie upon his face, limbs and body with the heaviness of molten metal. Then, before he had opened his eyes, he became aware of the furious light that smote upon his lids, turning them to a flame-red curtain. His eye-balls ached with the muffled radiation; every nerve of his being cringed from the pouring sea of incalcescence; and there was a dull throbbing in his scalp, which might have been either headache induced by the heat, or the pain of a somewhat recent blow.

He recalled, very dimly, that there had been an expedition — somewhere — in which he had taken part; but his efforts to remember the details were momentarily distracted by new and inexplicable sensations. He felt now that he was moving swiftly, borne on something that pitched and bounded against a high wind that seared his face like the breath of hell.

He opened his eyes, and was almost blinded when he found himself staring at a whitish heaven where blown columns of steam went by like spectral genii. Just below the rim of his vision, there was something vast and incandescent, toward which, instinctively, he feared to turn. Suddenly he knew what it was, and began to realize his Situation. Memory came to him in a tumbling torment of images; and with it, a growing wonder and alarm.

He recalled the ramble he had taken, alone, amid the weird and scrubby jungles of the twilight zone of 'Mercury — that narrow belt, warm and

vaporous, lying beneath the broiling deserts on which an enormous sun glares perpetually, and the heaped and mountainous glaciers of the planet's nightward side.

He had not gone far from the rocket-ship —— a mile at most, toward the sulphurous, fuming afterglow of the sun, now wholly hidden by the planet's libration. Johnson, the head of that first scientific expedition to Mercury, had warned him against these solitary excursions; but Howard, a professional botanist, had been eager to hasten his investigations of the unknown world, in which they had now sojourned for a week of terrestrial time.

Contrary to expectation, they had found a low, thin, breathable atmosphere, fed by the melting of ice in the variable twilight belt — an air that was drawn continually in high winds toward the sun; and the wearing of special equipment was unnecessary. Howard had not anticipated any danger; for the shy, animal-like natives had shown no hostility and had fled from the earth-men whenever approached. The other life-forms, as far as had been determined, were of low, insensitive types, often semi-vegetative, and easily avoided when poisonous or carnivorous.

Even the huge, ugly, salamander-like reptiles who seemed to roam at will from the twilight zone to the scalding deserts beneath an eternal day, were seemingly quite inoffensive.

Howard had been examining a queer, unfamiliar growth resembling a large truffle, which he had found in an open space, among the pale, poddy, wind-bowed shrubs. The growth, when he touched it, had displayed signs of sluggish animation and had started to conceal itself, burrowing into the boggy soil. He was prodding the thing with the sponge-light branch of a dead shrub, and was wondering how to classify it, when, looking up, he had found himself surrounded by the Mercutian savages. They had stolen upon

him noiselessly from the semi-fungoid thickets; but he was not alarmed at first, thinking merely that they had begun to overcome their shyness and show their barbaric curiosity.

They were gnarled and dwarfish creatures, who walked partially erect at most times; but ran upon all fours when frightened. The earth-men had named them the Dlukus, because of the clucking sounds resembling this word which they often made. Their skins were heavily scaled, like those of reptiles; and their small, protruding eyes appeared to be covered at all times with a sort of thin film. Anything ghastlier or more repulsive than these beings could hardly have been found on the inner planets. But when they closed in upon Howard, walking with a forward crouch and clucking incessantly, he had taken their approach for a sort of overture and had neglected to draw his tonanite pistol. He saw that they were carrying rough pieces of some blackish mineral, and had surmised, from the way in which their webbed hands were held toward him, that they were bringing him a gift or peace-offering.

Their savage faces were inscrutable; and they had drawn very close before he was disillusioned as to their intent. Then, without warning, in a cool, orderly manner, they had begun to assail him with the fragments of mineral they carried. He had fought them; but his resistance had been cut short by a violent blow from behind, which had sent him reeling into oblivion.

All this he remembered clearly enough; but there must have been an indefinite blank, following his lapse into insensibility. What, he wondered, had happened during this interim, and where was he going? Was he a captive among the Dlukus? The glaring light and scorching heat could mean only one thing — that he had been carried into the sunward lands of

Mercury. That incandescent thing toward which he dared not look was the sun itself, looming in a vast arc above the horizon.

He tried to sit up, but succeeded merely in raising his head a little. He saw that there were leathery thongs about his chest, arms and legs, binding him tightly to some mobile surface that seemed to heave and pant beneath him. Slewng his head to one side, he found that this surface was horny, rounding and reticulated. It was like something he had seen.

Then, with a start of horror, he recognized it. He was bound, Mazeppa-like, to the back of one of those salamandrine monsters to which the earth-scientists had given the name of “heat-lizards.” These creatures were large crocodiles, but possessed longer legs than any terrestrial saurian. Their thick hides were apparently, to an amazing extent, non-conductors of heat, and served to insulate them against temperatures that would have parboiled any other known form of life.

The exact range of their habitat had not yet been learned; but they had been seen from the rocket-ship, during a brief sunward dash, in deserts where water was perpetually at the boiling point; where rills and rivers, flowing from the twilight zone, wasted themselves in heavy vapors from terrible cauldrons of naked rock.

Howard’s consternation, as he realized his plight and his probable fate, was mingled with a passing surprise. He felt sure that the Dlukus had bound him to the monster’s back, and wondered that beings so low in the evolutionary scale should have been intelligent enough to know the use of thongs. Their act showed a certain power of calculation, as well as a devilish cruelty. It was obvious that they had abandoned him deliberately to an awful doom.

However, he had little time for reflection. The heat-lizard, with an indescribable darting and running motion, went swiftly onward into the

dreadful hell of writhing steam and heated rock. The great ball of insupportable whiteness seemed to rise higher momentarily and to pour its beams upon Howard like the flood of an opened furnace. The horny mail of the monster was like a hot gridiron beneath him, scorching through his clothes; and his wrists and neck and ankles were seared by the tough leather cords as he struggled madly and uselessly against them.

Turning his head from side to side, he saw dimly the horned rocks that leaned toward him from curtains of hellish mist. His head swam deliriously, and the very blood appeared to simmer in his veins. He lapsed at intervals into deadly faintness: a black shroud seemed to fall upon him, but his vague senses were still oppressed by the crushing, searing radiation. He seemed to descend into bottomless gulfs, pursued by un pitying cataracts of fire and seas of molten heat. The darkness of his swoon was turned to immitigable light.

At times, Howard came back to full consciousness, and was forced to grit his teeth to avoid screaming with agony. His eyelids seemed to scorch his eyes, as he blinked in the blinding refraction; and he saw his surroundings in broken glimpses, through turning wheels of fire and blots of torrid color, like scenes from a mad kaleidoscope.

The heat-lizard was following a tortuous stream that ran in hissing rapids, among twisted crags and chasm-riven scarps. Rising in sheets and columns, the steam of the angry water was blown at intervals toward the earth-man, scalding his bare face and hands. The thongs cut into his flesh intolerably, when the monster leapt across mighty fissures that had been made by the cracking of the super-heated stone.

Howard's brain seemed to broil in his head, and his blood was a fiery torrent in his roasted body. He fought for breath — and his breath seared his lungs. The vapors eddied about him in deepening swirls, and he heard a

muffled roaring whose cause he could not determine. He became aware that the heat-lizard had paused; and moving his head a little, saw that it was standing on the rocky verge of a great gulf, into which the waters fell to an unknown depth, amid curtains of steam.

His heart and his senses failed him, as he struggled like a dying man to draw breath from the suffocating air. The precipice and the monster seemed to pitch and reel beneath him, the vapors swayed vertiginously, and he thought that he was plunging with his weird steed into the unfathomably shrouded gulf.

Then, from the burning mist, the hooded forms of white and shining devils appeared to rise up and seize him, as if to receive him into their unknown hell. He saw their strange, unhuman faces; he felt the touch of their fingers, with a queer and preternatural coolness, on his seared flesh; and then all was darkness...

II

Howard awoke under circumstances that were novel and inexplicable. Instantly, with great clearness, he remembered all that had occurred prior to his final lapse, but could find no clue to his present situation.

He was lying on his back in a green radiance — a soft and soothing light that reminded him of the verdant green and emerald seawater of the far-off Earth. The light was all about him, it seemed to flow beneath and above him, laying his body with cool ripples that left a sense of supreme well-being.

He saw that he was quite naked; and he had the feeling of immense buoyancy, as if he had been rendered weightless. Wondering, he saw that his skin was entirely free of burns, and realized that he felt no pain, no ill-

effects of any kind, such as would have seemed inevitable after his dread ordeal in the Mercurian desert.

For awhile, he did not associate the green luminosity with any idea of limitation; for he seemed to be floating in a vast abyss. Then, suddenly, he perceived his error. Putting out his hands, he touched on either side the wall of a narrow vault, and saw that its roof was only a few feet above him. The floor lay at an equal distance beneath; and he himself, without visible support, was reclining in mid-air. The green light, streaming mysteriously from all the sides of the vault, had given him the illusion of unbounded space.

Abruptly, at his feet, the end of the vault seemed to disappear in a white glory like pure sunlight. Long, sinuous, six-fingered hands reached out from the glory, grasped him about the ankles, and drew him gently from the green-lit space in which he floated. Weight seemed to return to him as his limbs and body entered the dazzling whiteness; and a moment later, he found himself standing erect in a large chamber, lined with some sort of pale, shimmering metal. Beside him, a strange, unearthly being was dosing the panel-like door through which he had been drawn from the emerald-litten vault; and beyond this being, there were two others of the same type, one of whom was holding Howard's garments in his arms.

In growing astonishment, Howard gazed at these incredible entities. Each of them was about the height of a tall man, and the physical conformation was vaguely similar to that of mankind, but was marked by an almost god-like beauty and grace of contour, such as could hardly have been found in the most perfect of antique marbles.

Nostrils, ears, lips, hands, and all other features and members, were carved with well-nigh fantastic delicacy; and the skin of these beings, none of whom wore any robe or raiment, was white and translucent, and seemed

to shine with an internal radiance. In place of hair, the full, intellectual heads were crowned with a mass of heavy flesh-like filaments, hued with changing iridescence, and tossing and curling with a weird, restless life, like the serpent locks of Medusa. The feet were like those of men, except for long, horny spurs that protruded from the heels.

The three entities returned the earth-man's gaze with unreadable eyes, brilliant as diamonds and cold as far-off stars. Then, to complete his amazement, the being who had just closed the door of the vault began to address him in high, flute-sweet tones, which baffled his ears at first, but after a little, became recognizable as flawless English.

"We trust," said the being, "that you have recovered wholly from your late experience. It was fortunate that we were watching you through our televisors when you were seized by the savages and were bound to the back of the *groko* — that creature known to you as the 'heat-lizard.' These beasts are often tamed by the savages, who, being ignorant of the use of artificial heat, make a strange use of the *groko* s' proclivities for ranging the terrible sunward deserts. Captives caught from rival tribes — and sometimes even their own kin — are tied to the monsters, who carry them through oven-like temperatures till the victims are thoroughly roasted — or, as you would say, done to a turn. Then the *grokos* return to their masters — who proceed to feast on cooked meat.

"Luckily we were able to rescue you in time; for the *groko*, in its wanderings, approached one of our cavern-exits in the great desert. Your body was covered with enormous burns when we found you; and you would assuredly have died from the effects, if we had not exposed you to the healing ray in the green vault. This ray, like many others, is unknown to your scientists; and it has, among other things, the peculiar power of

nullifying gravity. Hence your sensation of weightlessness under its influence.”

“Where am I? And who are you?” cried Howard.

“You are in the interior of Mercury,” said the being. “I am Agvur, a savant, and a high noble of the ruling race of this world.” He went on in a tone of half-disdainful explanation, as if lecturing to a child: “We call ourselves the Oumnis; and we are an old people, wise and erudite in all the secrets of nature. To protect ourselves from the intense radiations of the sun, which of course are more powerful on Mercury than on the further planets, we dwell in caverns lined with a metallic substance of our own composition. This substance, even in thin sheets, excludes all the harmful rays, some of which can pierce all other forms of matter to any depth. When we emerge to the outer world, we wear suits of this metal, whose name in our language is *mouffa*.

“Being thus insulated at all times, we are practically immortal, as well as exempt from disease; for all death and decay, in the course of nature, are caused by certain solar rays whose frequency is beyond detection of your instruments. The metal does not exclude the radiations that are beneficial and necessary to life; and by means of an apparatus similar in its principle to radio, our under-world is illumined with transmitted sunlight.”

Howard began to express his thanks to Agvur. His brain was giddy with wonder, and his thoughts whirled in a maze of astounding speculations.

Agvur, with a swift and graceful gesture, seemed to wave aside his expression of gratitude. The being who bore Howard’s garments came forward, and helped him, in a deft, valet-like fashion, to put them on.

Howard wanted to ask a hundred questions; for the very existence of intelligent, highly evolved beings such as the Oumnis on Mercury had been unsuspected by earth-scientists. Above all, he was curious regarding the

mastery of human language displayed by Agvur. His question, as if divined by a sort of telepathy, was forestalled by the Mercutian.

“We are possessed of many delicate instruments,” said Agvur, “which enable us to see and hear — and even to pick up other sense-impressions — at immense distances. We have long studied the nearer planets, Venus, Earth and Mars, and have often amused ourselves by listening to human conversations. Our brain-development, which is vastly superior to yours, has made it a simple matter for us to learn your speech; and of course the science, history and sociology of your world is an open book to us. We watched the approach of your ether-ship from space; and all the movements of your party since landing have been observed by us.”

“How far am I from the rocket-ship?” asked Howard. “I trust you can help me to get back.”

“You are now a full mile beneath the surface of Mercury,” said Agvur, “and the part of the twilight zone in which your vessel lies is about five miles away and could readily be reached by an incline leading upward to a small exit in a natural cavern within sight of the ship. Doubtless some of the members of your party have seen the cavern and have assumed that it was a mere animal-den. When your vessel landed, we took care to block the exit with a few loose boulders and fragments of detritus, easily removable.

“As to rejoining your comrades, — well, I fear that it will scarcely be practicable. You must be our guest — perhaps indefinitely.” There was a kind of brusqueness in his tone as he concluded:

“We do not want our existence known to terrestrial explorers. From what we have seen of your world, and your dealings with the peoples of Mars and Venus, whose territories you have begun to arrogate, we think it would be unwise to expose ourselves to human curiosity and rapacity. We are few in number, and we prefer to remain in peace — undisturbed.”

Before Howard could frame any sort of protest, there came a singular interruption. Loud and imperious, with clarion-like notes, a voice rang out in the empty air between Agvur and the earthman. Howard was ungovernably startled; and the three Mercutians all seemed to stiffen with rapt attention. The voice went on for nearly a minute, speaking rapidly, with accents of arrogant command. Howard could make nothing of the words, whose very phonetic elements were strange and unfamiliar. But a chill ran through him at something which he sensed in the formidable voice — a something that told of relentless, implacable power.

The voice ended on a high, harsh note, and the listening Mercutians made a queer gesture with their heads and hands, as if to indicate submission to a superior will

“Our temporal ruler and chief scientist, Ounavodo,” said Agvur, “has just spoken from his hall in the lower levels. After hours of deliberation, he has reached a decision regarding your fate. In a sense, I regret the decision, which seems a trifle harsh to me; but the mandates of the Shol, as we call our ancient ruler, are to be obeyed without question. I must ask you to follow me, and I shall explain as we go along. The order must be executed without delay.”

In perplexity not unmingled with consternation, Howard was led by Agvur to a sort of inclined hall or tunnel, on which the chamber opened. The tunnel was seemingly interminable, and was lit by brilliant sourceless light — the transmitted sun-rays of which the Mercutian had spoken. Like the chamber, it was lined with a pale metallic substance.

An odd machine, shaped like a small open boat, and mounted on little wheels or castors, stood before the door, on the easy monotonous grade. Agvur stationed himself in its hollow prow, motioning Howard to follow. When the other Oumnis had placed themselves behind Howard, Agvur

pulled a sort of curving lever, and the machine began to glide rapidly, in perfect silence, down the interminable hell.

“This tunnel,” said Agvur, “runs upward to the exit near your vessel; and it leads down to the heart of our underworld realms. If the worst happens — as I fear it may — you will see only the antechambers of our labyrinth of caverns, in which we have dwelt, immune to disease and old age, for so many centuries. I am sorry; for I had hoped to take you to my own laboratories, in the nether levels. There you might have served me... in certain biologic tests.

“Ounavodo,” he went on, in calm explanatory tones, “has ordered the fusing and casting of a certain quantity of the *mouffa*-alloy, to be used in the making of new garments. This alloy, invented aeons ago by our metallurgists, is a compound of no less than six elements, and is made in two grades, one for the lining of our caverns, and the other exclusively for raiment.

“Both, for their perfection, require a seventh ingredient — a small admixture of living, protoplasmic matter, added to the molten metal in the furnace. Only thus — for a reason that is still mysterious to our savants — can the *mouffa* acquire its full power of insulation against the deadly solar rays.

“The *mouffa* used in comparatively heavy sheets for cavern-lining needs only the substance of inferior life-forms, such as the *grokos*, the half-animal savages of the twilight zone, and various creatures which we catch or breed in our underworld tunnels. But the higher grade of *mouffa*, employed in light, flexible sheets for suiting, requires the protoplasm of superior life.

“Regretfully, at long intervals, we have been compelled to sacrifice one of our own scanty number in the making of new metal to replace that which has become outworn. Whenever possible, we select those who in some

manner have offended against our laws; but such infringements are rare, and commonly the victim has been chosen by a sort of divination

“After studying you closely in his televisic mirror, Ounavodo has decided that you are sufficiently high in the evolutionary scale to provide the protoplasmic element in the next lot of *mouffa*. At least, he thinks that the test is worth trying, in the interests of science.”

“However, in order that you should not feel that you are being discriminated against or treated unjustly, you will merely take your chance of being chosen from among many others. The method of selection will be revealed to you in due time.”

While Agvur was speaking, the vehicle had sped swiftly down the endless incline, passing several other barge-shaped cars driven by the white, naked Immortals, whose serpentine locks flowed behind them on the air. Occasionally there were openings in the tunnel wall, leading no doubt to side-caverns; and after a mile or two, they came to a triple branching, where caverns ran upward at reverse angles from the main passage. Horrified and shaken as he was by Agvur’s disclosure, Howard took careful note of the route they were following.

He made no reply to the Mercutian. He felt his helplessness in the hands of an alien, extra-human race, equipped, it would seem, with scientific knowledge and power to which humanity had not yet attained. Thinking with desperate quickness, he decided that it would be better to pretend resignation to the will of his captors. His hand stole instinctively to the pocket in which he had carried the little tonanite pistol with its twelve charges of deadly heat-producing explosive; and he was dismayed, though hardly surprised, to find that the weapon was gone.

His movement was noted by Agvur; and a strange sardonic smile flickered across the unhumanly intellectual face of the savant. In his

desperation, Howard thought of leaping from the car; but to do this would have meant death or serious injury at the high speed of their descent.

He became aware that the incline had ended in a large level cavern with numerous side-openings where multitudes of Oumnis were passing in and out. Here they left the boat-like vehicle; and Howard was led by Agvur through one of the side-exits, into another vast chamber, where perhaps fifty of the white people were standing in silent, semi-circular rows.

These beings were all fronting toward the opposite wall; but many of them turned to watch the earth-man with expressions of unreadable curiosity or disdain, as Agvur drew him forward to the first of the waiting ranks and motioned him to take his place at the end

Now, for the first time, Howard saw the singular object which the Oumnis were facing. Apparently it was some sort of rootless plant-growth, with a swollen, yellowish bole or body like that of barrel-cactus. From this body, tall as a man, leafless branches of vivid arsenic green, fringed with a white hispidity, trailed in limp, sinuous masses on the cavern-floor.

Agvur spoke in a piercing whisper: "The plant is called the Rocalim, and we employ it to choose, from a given quota, the person who shall be cast into the furnace of molten *mouffa*. You will perceive that, including yourself, there are about fifty candidates for this honor — all of whom, for one reason or another, in varying degrees, have incurred the displeasure of Ounavodo, our have given rise to doubt regarding their social usefulness. One by one, you are to walk about the Rocalim in a complete circle, approaching well within reach of the sensitive, mobile branches; and the plant will indicate the destined victim by touching him with the tips of these branches."

Howard felt, as Agvur spoke, the chill of a sinister menace; but in the weirdness of the ceremony that followed, he almost lost his apprehension of

personal peril.

One by one, from the further end of the row in which he was standing, the silent Oumnis went forward and circled the strange plant, walking slowly within a few feet of the inert branches of poisonous green that resembled sleepy, half-coiled serpents. The Roccalim preserved a torpid stillness, without the least sign of animation, as Oumni after Oumni finished his perilous circuit and retired to the further side of the room, there to stand and watch the perambulations of the others.

About twenty of the white Immortals had undergone this ordeal, when Howard's turn came. Resolutely, with a sense of unreality and grotesquery rather than actual danger, he stepped forward and began his circuit of the living plant. The Oumnis looked on like alabaster Statues; and all was utterly still and silent, except for a muffled, mysterious throbbing, as of underworld machinery at a distance.

Howard moved on in an arc, watching the green branches with a growing tenseness. He had gone half the required distance when he felt, rather than saw, a flash of swift, intense light that appeared to stab downward from the cavern roof and strike the lumpish yellow bole of the Roccalim. The light faded in the merest fraction of time, leaving Howard in doubt as to whether he had really seen it.

Then, as he went on, he perceived with startled horror that the trailing tentacular boughs had begun to twitch and quiver, and were lifting slowly from the floor and waving toward him. On and on they came, rising and straightening, like a mass of ropy kelp that flows in an ocean-stream. They reached him, they slithered with reptilian ease about his body, and touched his face with their venomous-looking tips, clammy and inquisitive.

Howard drew back, wrenching himself away from the waving mass, and found Agvur at his elbow. The face of the Mercutian was touched with an

unearthly gloating; and his iridescent locks floated upward, quivering with weird restlessness, like the Roccalim branches.

At that moment, it came to Howard that his fate had been predetermined from the beginning; that the swift, evanescent flash of light, proceeding from an unknown source, had perhaps served in some manner to irritate the living plant and provoke the action of its tentacular limbs.

Swift anger flared in the earth-man, but he repressed it. He must be cautious, must watch for an opportunity — even the slimmest — of escape. By giving the impression that he was resigned, he might throw his captors off their guard.

He saw that a number of new Mercutians, equipped with long glittering tubes like blow-pipes, had entered the cavern and were surrounding him. The companions of his late ordeal had begun to disperse in various directions.

“I am sorry,” said Agvur, “that the choice should have fallen upon you. But your death will be swift — and the time is near at hand. The fusing must be completed, and the metal must be poured off and cast in thin, malleable sheets, before the next term of darkness and slumber, which will occur in little more than an hour. During this term — three hours out of every thirty-six — the transmitted sunlight is excluded from all our chambers and passages; and most of our machinery, *which derives its power from light, is rendered inactive.*”

III

In mingled horror and dumbfoundment, Howard was taken through an opposite entrance of the Roccalim’s cavern and along a sort of hall which appeared to run parallel with the one in which the incline had ended. Agvur walked at his side; and the Oumni guards were grouped before and behind

him. He surmised that the glittering, hollow tubes they carried were weapons of some novel type.

As they went on, the mysterious throbbing noise drew steadily nearer Howard saw that the far end of the corridor was illumed with a fiery red light. The air was touched with queer metallic odors; and the temperature, which had heretofore been one of unobtrusive warmth, seemed to rise slightly.

At one side, through an open door in the passage wall, as they neared the source of the red light, Howard saw a large room whose further end was filled with lofty banks of shining cylinder-shaped mechanisms. In front of these mechanisms, a solitary Mercutian stood watching an immense pivot-mounted ball which appeared to be filled nearly to the top with liquid blackness, leaving a crescent of bright crystal. Near the ball, there was a sort of inclined switch-board, from which arose many rods and levers, made of some transparent material.

“The lighting-apparatus of all our caverns is controlled from that room,” said Agvur, with a sort of casual boastfulness. “When the ball has turned entirely black, the sunlight will be turned off for the three-hour period, which gives us all the sleep and rest we require.”

A moment more, and the party reached the end of the passage. Howard stood blinking and breathless with wonder when he saw the source of the dazzling red light.

He was on the threshold of a cavern so enormous that its roof was lost in luminosity and gave the effect of a natural sky. Titanic machines of multiform types, some squat and ungainly and others like prodigious bulbs or huge inverted funnels, crowded the cavern-floor; and in the center, towering above the rest was a double, terrace-like platform of sable stone, thirty feet in height, with many pipes of dark metal that ramified from its

two tiers to the floor, like the legs of some colossal spider. From the middle of the summit, the ruddy light arose in a great pillar. Gleaming strangely against the fiery glow, the forms of Oumnis moved like midges.

Just within the entrance of the Cyclopean room, there stood a sort of rack, from which hung a dozen suits of the *mouffa*-metal. Their construction was very simple, and they closed and opened at the breast, with odd dovetailings. The head was a loose, roomy hood; and the metal had somehow been rendered transparent in a crescent-like strip across the eyes.

The suits were donned by Agvur and the guards; and Howard noticed that they were extremely light and flexible. He himself, at the same time, was ordered to disrobe.

“The *mouffa* mixture, during the process of fusing, gives off some dangerous radiations,” said Agvur. “These will hardly matter in your case; and the suits of finished metal will protect my companions and me against them, even as against the deadly solar rays.”

Howard had now removed all his clothes, which he left lying near the rack. Still pretending his resignation, but thinking desperately all the while and observing closely the details of his situation, he was led along the crowded floor, amid the sinister throbbing and muttering of the strange engines. Steep, winding stairs gave access to the terraced mass of dark stone. The earth-man saw as he went upward, that the lower tier was fitted with broad, shallow moulds, in which doubtless the metal would run off from the furnace to cool in sheets.

Howard felt an almost overpowering heat when he stood on the upper platform; and the red glare blinded him. The furnace itself, he now saw, was a circular crater, fifteen feet across, in the black stone. It was filled nearly to the rim with the molten metal, which eddied with a slow maelstrom-like movement, agitated by some unknown means, and glowing unbearably. The

black stone must have been a non-conductor of heat, for it was cool beneath Howard's bare soles.

On the broad space about the furnace, a dozen Oumnis, all sheathed in the glittering *mouffa*, were standing. One of them was turning a small, complicated-looking wheel, mounted obliquely on a miniature pillar; and as if he were regulating the temperature of the furnace, the metal glowed more brightly and eddied with new swiftness in its black crater.

Apart from this wheel, and several rods that protruded from long, notched grooves in the stone, there was no visible machinery on the platform. The stone itself was seemingly all one block, except for a slab, ten feet long and two feet wide, which ran to the crater's verge. Howard was directed to stand on this slab, at the end opposite to the furnace.

"In another minute," said Agvur, "the slab will begin to move, will tilt, and precipitate you into the molten *mouffa*. If you wish, we can administer to you a powerful narcotic, so that your death will be wholly free of fear or pain."

Overcome by an unreal horror, Howard nodded his head in mechanical assent, snatching hopelessly at the momentary reprieve. Perhaps... even yet... there might be a chance; though he could have laughed at himself for the impossible notion.

Peering again toward the awful furnace, he was startled to see an inexplicable thing. Foot by foot, from the solid stone of the crater's further lip, there rose the figure of a Mercutian, till it stood with haughty features, very tall and pale and wholly naked upon the platform. Then, as Howard gasped with incredulous awe, the figure seemed to step in a stately manner from the verge, and hang suspended in air above the glowing cauldron.

"It is the Shol, Ounavodo," said Agvur in reverent tones, "though he is now many miles away in the nether caverns, he has projected his televisual

image to attend the ceremony.”

One of the Mercurian guards had come forward, bearing in his hands a heavy, shallow bowl of some bronze-like substance, filled with a hueless liquid. This he proffered to the earth-man.

“The narcotic acts, immediately,” said Agvur, as if in reassurance.

Giving a quick, unobtrusive glance about him, Howard accepted the bowl and raised it to his lips. The narcotic was odorless as well as colorless, and had the consistency of a thick, sluggish oil.

“Be quick,” admonished Agvur. “The slab responds to a timing mechanism; and already it starts to move.”

Howard saw that the slab was gliding slowly, bearing him as on a great protruding tongue toward the furnace. It began to tilt a little beneath his feet.

Tensing all his muscles, he leapt from the slab and hurled the heavy bowl in the face of Agvur, who stood close by. The Mercurian staggered, and before he could regain his balance, Howard sprang upon him, and lifting him bodily, flung him across the rising, sliding slab, which bore Agvur along in its accelerated movement. Stunned by the fall, and unable to recover himself, he rolled from the tilting stone into the white-hot maelstrom and disappeared with a splash. The liquid seethed and eddied with a swifter motion than before.

For a moment, the assembled Oumnis stood like metal statues; and the televisual image of the Shol, standing inscrutable and watchful above the furnace, had not stirred. Leaping at the foremost guards, Howard flung them aside as they started to lift their tubular weapons. He gained the platform’s railless verge, but saw that several Oumnis had run to intercept him before he could reach the stairs. It was a twelve-foot drop to the second platform, and he feared to leap with bare feet. The strange curving pipes which ran

from the upper platform to the main cavern-floor, offered his only possible means of escape.

These pipes were of darkish metal, perfectly smooth and joint-less, and were about ten inches thick. Straddling the nearest one, where it entered the black stone just below the verge, Howard began to slide as quickly as he could toward the floor.

His captors had followed him to the platform-edge; and facing them as he slid, the earth-man saw two of the Immortals aim their weapons at him. From the hollow tubes, there issued glowing balls of yellow fire which came flying toward Howard. One of them fell short, striking the side of the great pipe, and causing it to melt away like so much solder. He saw the dripping of the molten metal as he ducked to avoid the second ball.

Others of the Oumnis were levelling their weapons; and a rain of the terrible fire-globes fell about Howard as he slid along the pipe's lower portion, where it curved sharply toward the floor. One of the balls brushed his right arm and left an agonizing burn.

He reached the floor, and saw that a dozen Immortals were descending the platform-stairs in great bounds. The main cavern, fortunately, was deserted. The earth-man leapt for the shelter of a huge rhomboidal machine, and heard the hiss and drip of liquid metal as the fire-balls struck behind him.

Threading his way among the looming mechanisms, and interposing their bulks as much as possible between himself and his pursuers, Howard made for the entrance through which he had been conducted to the furnace by Agvur. There were other exits from the immense cavern; but these would have led him deeper into the unknown labyrinth. He had no clearly formulated plan, and his ultimate escape was more than problematical; but his instincts bade him to go on as long as he could before being recaptured.

He heard the mysterious pounding of the untended mechanisms all about him; but there was no sound from his pursuers, who came on in grim silence, with incredible leaps, gaining visibly upon him. Then, startlingly, as he rounded one of the machines, he found himself confronted by the televisual phantom of the Shol, standing in an attitude of menace, and waving him back with imperious gestures. He felt the awful burning gaze of eyes that were hypnotic with age-old wisdom and immemorial power; and he seemed to hurl himself against an unseen barrier, as he sprang at the formidable image. He felt a slight electric shock that jarred his entire body; but apparently the phantom was capable of little more than visual manifestation. It seemed to melt away; and then it was hovering above and a little before him, pointing out his line of flight to the pursuing Oumnis. Passing a huge squat cylinder, he came to the rack on which the suits of *mouffa* had hung. Two of them still remained. Disregarding his own garments, which lay in a heap nearby, he snatched one of the metal suits from its place and rolled the thin, marvellously flexible stuff into a bundle as he continued his flight. Perhaps, somewhere, he would have a chance to put it on; and thus disguised, might hope to prolong his freedom — or even to find his way from this tremendous underworld.

There was a broad open space between the rack and the cavern exit. Howard's pursuers emerged from the medley of towering mechanisms before he could reach the doorway, and he was forced to dodge another fusillade of the fire-balls, which splattered in white-hot fury all around him. Before him, the menacing phantom of the Shol still hovered.

Now he had gained the corridor beyond the exit. He meant to retrace the route by which he had come with Agvur, if possible. But as he neared the door through which he had seen the watcher of the darkening globe, and the light-controlling mechanisms, he perceived that a number of Mercutians,

armed with fire-tubes, were coming to intercept his flight in the corridor. Doubtless they had been summoned through some sort of telaudition by the furnace-tenders.

Looking back, he saw that his former guards were dosing upon him. In a few moments, he would be surrounded and trapped. With no conscious idea, other than the impulse to flee, he darted through the open door of the cavern of light-machines.

The solitary watcher still stood beside the massive ball with his back toward the earth-man. The crystal crescent on the dark globe had narrowed to a thin horn, like the bow of a dying moon.

A mad, audacious inspiration came to Howard, as he recalled what Agvur had told him about the control of the lighting-system. Quickly and silently he stole toward the watcher of the ball.

Again the vengeful image of the Shol stood before him, as if to drive him back; and as he neared the unsuspecting watcher, it rose in air and poised above the ball, warning the Oumni with a loud, harsh cry. The watcher turned, snatching up a heavy metal rod that lay on the floor, and leapt to meet Howard, raising his weapon for a ferocious blow.

Before the rod could descend, the earth-man's fist had caught the Mercurtian full in the face, driving him back upon the slanting dial of regulative levers beside the pivot-mounted ball. There was a shivering crash as he fell among the curving crystalline rods; and at the same instant, utter overwhelming darkness rushed upon the room and blotted out the banks of gleaming mechanism, the fallen Oumni, and the phantom of Shol.

IV

Standing uncertain and bewildered, the earth-man heard a low moaning from the injured Mercurtian, and a loud wail of consternation from the

corridor without, where the two groups of his pursuers had found themselves overtaken by darkness. The wailing ceased abruptly; and except for the moaning near at hand, which still went on, there was absolute silence. Howard realized that he no longer heard the mutter of the strange engines in the furnace-room. Doubtless their operation had in some manner been connected with the lighting-system, and had ceased with darkness.

Howard still retained the suit of *mouffa*. Groping about, he found the metal rod that had dropped from the hand of the watcher. It would make a highly serviceable weapon. Grasping it firmly, he started in what he surmised to be the direction of the door. He went slowly and cautiously, knowing that his pursuers would have gathered to await him, or might even be creeping toward him.

Listening intently, he heard a faint metallic rustle. Some of the Oumnis, clothed in *mouffa*, were coming to seek him in the darkness. His own bare feet were soundless; and stepping to one side, he heard the rustling pass. With redoubled caution, he stole on toward the door, stretching one hand before him.

Suddenly his fingers touched a smooth surface, which he knew to be the wall. He had missed the door in his groping. Listening again, he seemed to hear a faint sound on the left, as if he were being followed; and moving in the opposite direction, along the wall, he encountered empty space and saw a dim glimmer of seemingly sourceless light.

His eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, and he made out a mass of dubious shadows against the glimmering. He had found the door, which was lined with waiting Oumnis.

Lifting his bar, he rushed upon the shadows, striking blow after blow, and stumbling over the bodies that fell before his onslaught. There were shrill cries about him, and he broke from chill, *mouffa*-sheathed fingers that

sought to clutch him in the gloom. Then, somehow, he had broken through, and was in the corridor.

The glimmering, he saw, came from the cavern of machines, where the hidden furnace still burned. Into the dying glow that lit the entrance, there came hurrying figures, each of which appeared to have an enormous Cyclopean eye of icy green. Howard realized that more Mercutians, bearing artificial lights, were coming to join the pursuit.

Keeping close to the corridor wall, he ran as fast as he dared in the solid blackness, toward the cavern of the Roccalim. He heard a stealthy metallic rustling, as the foremost Oumnis followed; and glancing back, saw them dimly outlined against the remote glow. They came on in a cautious, lagging manner, as if they were waiting for the new contingent with the green lights. After a little, he saw that the two parties had united and were following him steadily.

Fingering the wall at intervals as he ran, Howard reached the entrance of the large chamber in whose center stood the Roccalim. The lights were gaining upon him rapidly. Calculating in his mind, as well as he could, the direction of the opposite doorway, giving on the main tunnel that led to the incline, he started toward it. As he went on, he veered a little, thinking to avoid the monstrous plant-growth. It was like plunging into a blind abyss; and he seemed to wander for an immense distance, feeling sure that he would reach the opposite wall at any moment.

Suddenly his feet tripped on an unknown obstruction, and he fell at full length, landing on what seemed to be a tangle of great hairy ropes that pricked his bare skin in a thousand places. Instantly, he knew that he had collided with the Roccalim.

The mass of python-like branches lay inert beneath him, without a quiver of animation. Doubtless, in the absence of light, the queer, semi-animal

growth was torpid.

Pulling himself from the spiny couch on which he had fallen, Howard looked back and perceived the thronging of green lights, cold and malignant as the eyes of boreal dragons. His pursuers were entering the cavern, and would overtake him in a few instants.

Still clutching the *mouffa* garments and the metal bar, he groped across the tangle of branches, pricking his feet painfully at every step. Suddenly he plunged through to the floor, and found that he was standing in an open space where the heavy creepers, descending from the hole, had parted on either side. Crouching down, as the lights approached him, he found a low, hollow place into which he could crawl beneath the branches, close to the cactus-like stem.

The creepers were thick enough to conceal him from cranial scrutiny. Lying there, with their prickly weight upon him, he saw through narrow rifts the passing of the green lights toward the outer cavern. Apparently none of the Mercutians had thought of pausing to examine the mass of Roccalim branches.

Emerging from his fantastic hiding-place, after all the Oumnis had gone past, Howard followed them boldly. He saw the vanishing of their icy lamps as they entered the outside tunnel. Moving again in utter darkness, he found the exit. There he recovered the running pencils of light, cast by the hurrying lamps as their bearers went toward the incline.

Following, Howard stumbled against an unseen object, which was either the vehicle used by Agvur, or another of the same type. Probably, in the shutting-off of power, these vehicles were now useless: otherwise, some of them might have been employed by the earth-man's pursuers. Hunters and hunted were on an equal footing; and realizing this, Howard felt for the first time an actual thrill of hope.

Going on, with the lights moving steadily before him, he started up the interminable incline which led — perhaps — to freedom. The tunnel was deserted, except for the hunters and their human quarry; and it seemed as if the multitude of Oumnis seen by Howard on his arrival with Agvur had all retired with the falling of darkness. Perhaps they had to for the usual three-hour term of night and repose.

The light-bearers appeared to disregard all the side passages that ran from the main tunnel. It occurred to Howard that they were hastening toward the surface exits, with the idea of cutting off his possible escape. Afterwards they would hunt him down at leisure.

The incline ran straight ahead; and there was little danger of losing sight of the lights. Howard paused an instant to slip on the suit of *mouffa*, hoping that it might serve to deceive or baffle his hunters later on. The raiment was easily donned, and fitted him quite loosely; but the unfamiliar intricate method of fastening eluded his untaught fingers. He could not remember quite how it had been done; so he went on with the strange garment open at the breast. The queer elongated heels, made to accommodate the spurs of the Immortals, flapped behind him.

He kept as much as possible the same relative distance between himself and the Oumnis. Glancing back, after awhile, he was horrified to see, far down, the tiny green eyes of another group of lights following him. Evidently others had rallied to the pursuit.

It was a long, interminably tedious climb — mile after mile of that monotonous tunnel whose gloom was relieved only by the sinister points of green light. The Mercutians went on at a tireless pace, unhuman and implacable; and only by ceaseless exertion, half walking, half running, could the earthman maintain his position midway between the companies of lamps.

He panted heavily, and a faintness came upon him at times, in which the lights seemed to blur. A great weariness clogged his limbs and his brain. How long it was since he had eaten, he could not know. He was not aware of hunger or thirst; but he seemed to fight an ever-growing weakness. The corridor became a black eternity, haunted by the green eyes of cosmic demons.

Hour after hour he went on, through a cycle of sunless night. He lost the sense of time, and his movements became a sort of automation. His limbs were numb and dead, and it was only his relentless will that lived and drove him on. Almost, at times, he forgot where he was going — forgot everything but the blind, primitive impulse of flight. He was a nameless thing, fleeing from anonymous terror.

At last, through the crushing numbness of his fatigue, there dawned the realization that he was gaining a little on the group of lights ahead. Possibly their bearers had paused in doubt or debate. Then, suddenly, he saw that the lights were spreading out, were diverging and vanishing on either hand, till only four of them remained.

Dimly puzzled, he went on, and came to that triple division of the tunnel which he remembered passing with Agvur. He saw now that the party of Oumnis had divided into three contingents, following all the branches. Doubtless each tunnel led to a separate exit.

Recalling what Agvur had said, he kept to the middle passage. This, if Agvur had spoken truly, would lead to an exit in the twilight zone, not far from the rocket-ship. The other tunnels would lead he knew not where — perhaps to the terrible deserts of heat and the piled, chaotic glaciers of the nightward hemisphere. The one he was following, with luck, would enable him to rejoin his comrades.

A sort of second wind came to Howard now — as if hope had revived his swooning faculties. More clearly than before, he became conscious of the utter silence and profound mystery of this underworld empire, of which he had seen — was to see — so little. His hope quickened when he looked back and saw that the lights behind him had diminished in number, as if the second party had likewise separated to follow all three of the tunnels. It was obvious that there was no general pursuit. In all likelihood the smashing of the transmission levers had deranged all the machineries of the Immortals, even to their system of communication. Howard's escape, doubtless, was known only to those who had been present or near at the time. He had brought chaos and demoralization upon this super-scientific people.

V

Mile after mile of that monotone of gloom. Then, with a start of bewilderment, the earth-man realized that the four lights in front had all disappeared. Looking back, he saw that the lamps which followed him had similarly vanished. About, before and behind there was nothing but a solid, tomb-like wall of darkness. Howard felt a strange disconcertment, together with the leaden, crushing return of his weariness. He went on with doubtful, slackening steps, following the right hand wall with cautious fingers. After awhile he turned a sharp corner; but he did not recover the lost lights. There was a drafty darkness in the air, and odor of stone and mineral, such as he had not met heretofore in the *mouffa*-lined caverns. He began to wonder if he had somehow gone astray: there might have been other branchings of the tunnel, which he had missed in his groping. In a blind surge of alarm, he started to run, and crashed headlong against the angular wall of another turn in the passage.

Half-stunned, he picked himself up. He hardly knew, henceforth, whether he was maintaining the original course of his flight or was doubling on his own steps. For aught that he could tell, he might be lost beyond all redirection in a cross-labyrinth of caverns. He stumbled and staggered along, colliding many times with the tunnel-sides, which seemed to have closed in upon him and to have grown rough with flinty projections.

The draft in his face grew stronger, with a smell of water. Presently the blindfold darkness before him melted into a chill, bluish glimmering, which revealed the rugate walls and boulder-fanged roof of the natural passage he was following.

He came out in a huge, chamber-like cave of some marble-pallid stone with twisted columnar forms. The glimmering, he saw, was a kind of phosphorescence emitted by certain vegetable growths, probably of a thallophytic nature, which rose in thick clusters from the floor, attaining the height of a tall man. They were flabby and fulsome-looking, with abortive branches, and pendulous fruit-shaped nodes of etiolated purple along their puffy, whitish-blue stems. The phosphorescence, which issued equally from all portions of these plants, served to light the gloom for some distance around, and brought out dimly the columnated character of the cavern's further walls.

Howard saw, as he passed among them, that the plants were rootless. It seemed that they would topple at a touch; but happening to stumble against one of the clumps, he found that they supported his weight with resilient solidity. No doubt they were attached firmly by some sort of suction to the smooth stone.

In the middle of the cave, behind a lofty fringing of these luminous fungi, he discovered a pool of water, fed by a thin trickle that descended through the gloom from a high vault that the phosphorescence could not

illumine. Impelled by sudden, furious thirst, he slid back the *mouffa*-hood and drank recklessly, though the fluid was sharp and bitter with strange minerals. Then, with the ravening hunger of one who has not eaten for days, he began to eye the pear-shaped nodes of the tall thallophytes. He broke one of them from its parent stem, tore off the glimmering rind, and found that it was filled with a mealy pulp. A savourous, peppery odor tempted him to taste the pulp. It was not unpleasant, and forgetting all caution (possibly he had become a little mad from his extra-human ordeals) he devoured the stuff in hasty mouthfuls.

The node must have contained a narcotic principle; for almost immediately he was overpowered by an insuperable drowsiness. He fell back and lay where he had fallen, in a deep sodden sopor without dreams, for a length of time which, as far as he could know, might have been the interim of death between two lives. He awoke with violent nausea, a racking headache, and a feeling of hopeless, irredeemable confusion.

He drank again from the bitter pool, and then began to hunt with cloudy senses and feeble, uncertain steps for another exit than the tunnel by which he had entered. His mind was dull and heavily drugged, as if from the lingering of the unknown narcotic, and he could formulate no conscious plan of action but was led only by an animal-like impulse of flight.

He discovered a second opening, low, and fanged with broken-off pillar formations, in the opposite wall of the cavern. It was filed with Stygian darkness; and before entering it, he tore a lumpy branch from one of the phosphorescent fungi, to serve him in lieu of other light.

His subsequent wanderings were nightmarish and interminable. He seemed to have gotten into some tremendous maze of natural caverns, varying greatly in size, and intersecting each other in a bewildering

honeycomb fashion: an underworld that lay beyond the metal-insulated realm of the Oumnis.

There were long, tediously winding tunnels that went down into Cimmerian depth, or climbed at acolivitous angles. There were strait cubby-holes, dripping with unknown liquid ores, through which he crawled like a lizard on his belly; and Dantean gulfs that he skirted on slippery, perilous, broken ledges, hearing far below him the sullen sigh or the weirdly booming roar of sub Mercutian waters.

For awhile, his way led mainly downward, as if he were plunging to the bowels of the planet. The air became warmer and more humid. He came at last to the sheer brink of an incommensurable abyss, where noctilucant fungi, vaster than any he had yet seen, grew tall as giant trees along the precipice that he followed for miles. They were like fantastic monolithic tapers; but their luminosity failed to reveal the giddy depth above and beneath.

He met none of the Oumnis in this inexhaustible world of night and silence. But after he had rounded the great gulf, and had started to re-ascend in smaller caverns, he began to encounter, at intervals, certain blind, white, repulsive creatures the size of an overgrown rat, but without even the rudiments of tail or legs. In his demoralized condition of mind and body, he felt a primitive fear of these things, rather than the mere repugnance which their aspect would normally have aroused. However, they were non-aggressive and shrank sluggishly away from him. Once, he trod inadvertently on one of the creatures and leapt away, howling with fright, when it squirmed nauseously beneath his heel. Finding he had crushed its head, he took courage and began to belabor the flopping abnormality with the metal rod which he still carried. He mashed it into an oozy pulp — a pulp that still quivered with life; and then, overcome by bestial, atavistic

hunger, and forgetting all the painfully acquired prejudices of civilized man, he knelt down and devoured the pulp with shameless greed. Afterwards, replete, he stretched himself out and slept for many hours.

VI

He awoke with renewed physical strength, but with nerves and mind that were still partially shattered by his experiences. Like a savage who awakens in some primordial cave, he felt the irrational terror of darkness and mystery. His memories were dazed and broken, and he could recall the Oumnis only as a vague and almost supernatural source of fear, from which he had fled.

The fungus-bough, which had served him in lieu of a torch or lantern, was lying beside him in the darkness. With the bough in one hand and the metal rod in the other, he resumed his wanderings. He met more of the white, legless creatures; but he had conquered his fear of them now, and looked upon them only as a possible source of food. He proceeded to kill and eat one of them anon, relishing the worm-soft flesh as an aborigine would have relished a meal of grubs or white ants.

He had lost all notion of the passing of time or its measurement. He was a thing that clambered endlessly on Tartarean cavern-slopes or along the brink of lightless rivers and pools and chasms, killing when he was hungry, sleeping when his weariness became too urgent. Perhaps he went on for days; perhaps for many weeks, in a blind, instinctive search for light and outer air.

The flora and fauna of the caverns changed. He dragged himself through passages that were wholly lined with bristling, glowing thallophytes, some of which were tough and sharp as if fibred with iron. He came to tepid lakes whose waters were infested by long, agile, hydra-bodied creatures, divided

into tapeworm segments, that rose to dispute his way but were powerless to harm his *mouffa*-covered limbs with their toothless, pulpy mouths.

For awhile, he seemed to be passing through a zone of unnatural warmth, due, no doubt, to the presence of hidden volcanic activity. There were hot geysers, and gulfs from which sultry vapors rose, filling the air with queer, metallic-smelling gases that seemed to burn corrosively in his nostrils and lungs. Some remnant of his former scientific knowledge caused him to recoil from such neighbourhoods and retrace his footsteps into caverns free of these gases.

Fleeing from one of the mephitic-laden caves, he found himself in a mile-wide chamber, lined with fungi of uncommon exuberance, amid whose luminiferous growths he met with one of his most terrible adventures. A vast and semi-ophidian monster, white as the other life-forms he had met, and equally legless but owning a single, Cyclopean, phosphoric eye, leapt upon him from the unearthly vegetation and hurled him to the ground with the ram-like impact of its blunt, shapeless head. He lay half-stunned, while the monster began to ingest him in its enormous maw, starting with his feet. Seemingly the metal which he wore was no barrier to its appetite. The creature had swallowed him nearly to the hips, when he recovered his senses and realized his frightful predicament.

Smitten with hideous terror, howling and gibbering like a caveman, he lifted the metal rod, which his clutching fingers had somehow retained, and struck frantically at the awful head into whose mouth he was being drawn by inches. The blows made little or no impression on the great rubbery mass; and soon he was waist-deep in the monstrous maw. In his dire need, a trace of reasoning-power returned to him; and using the rod like a rapier he thrust it into the immense, glaring eye, burying it to his hand, and probably penetrating whatever rudimentary semblance of brain the animal possessed.

A pale and egg-like fluid oozed from the broken eye, and the slobbering lips tightened intolerably upon Howard, almost crushing him in what proved to be the death-spasm. The white, swollen barrel-thick body tossed for many minutes; and during its convulsions, Howard was knocked insensible. When he came to again, the creature was lying comparatively still; and the sack-like mouth had begun to relax, so that he was able to extricate himself from the dreadful gorge.

The shock of this experience completed his mental demoralization and drove him even further into primitive bruteness. At times, his brain was almost a blank; and he knew nothing, remembered nothing but the blind horror of those infra-planetary caverns and the dumb instinct that still impelled him to seek escape. Several times, as he continued his way through the thickets of fungi, he was forced to flee or hide from other monsters of the same type as the one that had so nearly ingested him. Then he entered a region of steep acclivities that took him ever upward. The air became chill and the caverns were seemingly void of vegetable or animal life. He wondered dully as to the reason of the growing cold; but his broken mind could suggest no explanation.

Before entering this realm, he had supplied himself with another fragment of luminiferous fungus to light his way. He was groping through a mountain-like wilderness of chasms and riven scarps and dolomites, when, at some distance above, he saw with inexpressible fright a glimmering as of two cold green eyes that moved among the crags. He had virtually forgotten the Oumnis and their lamps; but something — half intuition, half memory — warned him of direr peril than any he had hitherto met in the darkness.

He dropped his luminous torch and concealed himself behind one of the dolomitic formations. From his hiding-place, he saw the passing of two of the Immortals, clad in silvery *mouffa*, who descended the scarp and

vanished in the craggy gulfs below Whether or not they were hunting for him, he could not know; but when they had gone from sight, he resumed his climb, hurrying at breakneck speed and feeling that he must get as far away as possible from the bearers of those icy green lights.

The dolomites dwindled in size, and the steep chamber narrowed like the neck of a bottle and closed in upon him presently from all sides, till it was only a narrow, winding passage. The floor of the passage became fairly level. Anon, as he followed it, he was startled and blinded by a glare of light directly ahead — a light that was brilliant as pure sunshine. He cowered and stepped back, shielding his eyes with his hands till they became somewhat tempered to the glare. Then, stealthily, with a mingling of confused fears and dim, unworded hopes, he crept toward the light and came out in an endless metal hall, apparently deserted but filled as far as eye could see with the sourceless brilliance.

The mouth of the rough natural passage from which he had emerged was fitted with a sort of valve, which had been left open, doubtless by the Immortals he had seen among the nether crags. The boat-shaped vehicle they had used was standing in the hall. This vehicle, and the hall itself, were familiar to him, and he began to recollect, in a partial way, the ordeals he had undergone among the Oumnis before his flight into outer darkness.

The hall was slightly inclined; and he seemed to remember that the upward grade would presumably lead to a lost world of freedom. Apprehensively and furtively, he began to follow it, loping like an animal.

After he had gone for perhaps a mile, the floor became perfectly level, but the hall itself started to turn in a sort of arc. He was unable to see very far ahead. Then, so abruptly that he could not check his headlong flight, he came in view of three Oumnis, clothed in metal, who were all standing with their backs to him. A boat — vehicle was near at hand. One of the

Immortals was tugging at a huge, capstan-like bar that protruded from the wall of the passage; and as if in response to the bar, a sort of gleaming metal valve was descending slowly from the roof. Inch by inch, it came down like a mighty curtain; and soon it would close the entire passage and render impossible the earth-man's egress.

Somehow, it did not occur to Howard that the tunnel beyond the valve might lead to other realms than the outer air for which he longed so desperately. As if by a miracle, something of his former courage and resourcefulness had returned to him; and he did not turn and flee incontinently at sight of the Immortals as he would have done a short time before. He felt that now or never was his opportunity to escape from the sub-Mercutian levels. Leaping forward on the unsuspecting Oumnis, all of whom were intent on the closing of the valve, he struck at the foremost with his metal bar. The Mercutian toppled and went down with a clattering of *mouffa* on the floor. The one who was operating the lever continued his task, and Howard had no time to strike him down, for the remaining Immortal, with tigerish agility, had sprung back and was levelling the deadly fire-tube which he carried.

Howard saw that the great valve was still descending — was barely two feet above the cavern floor. He made a flying dive for the opening, sprawling on all fours and then crawling prone on his stomach beneath the terrible curtain of metal.

Struggling to rise, he found himself impeded and held back. He was in utter darkness now; but getting to his knees and groping about, he determined the cause of his retardation. The fallen valve had caught the loose elongated heel of the *mouffa* on his right foot. He had all the sensations of a trapped animal as he sought to wrench himself free. The

tough *mouffa* held, weighed down by the enormous valve; and it seemed that there was no escape.

Then, amid his desperation, he somehow remembered that the *mouffa*-armor was open at the breast. Awkwardly and painfully, he managed to crawl forth from it, leaving it there like a discarded lizard-skin.

Getting to his feet, he raced on in the darkness. He was without light, for he had dropped the phosphorescent bough in his dive under the closing valve. The cavern was rough and flinty to his naked feet; and he felt an icy wind, bleak as the breath of glaciers, that blew upon him as he went. The floor sloped upward, and in places it was broken into stair-like formations against which he stumbled and fell, bruising himself severely. Then he cut his head cruelly on a sharp stone that projected from the low roof. The wet, warm blood flowed down across his brow and into his eyes.

The passage steepened and the air took on a terrible frigidity. There was no sign of pursuit from the Oumnis; but fearing they would raise the valve and follow him, the earth-man hastened on. He was puzzled by the growing Arctic cold, but the suppositional reason seemed to elude him. His naked limbs and torso were studded with goose-flesh; and he began to shiver with violent ague, in spite of the high speed at which he ran and climbed.

Now the cavern-stairs were more regular and defined. They seemed to mount forever in the darkness; and growing accustomed to them he was able to grope his way from step to step with no more than an occasional fall or stumble. His feet were cut and bleeding; but the cold had begun to numb them and he felt little pain.

He saw a dim, circular patch of light far above him, and gasping with the icy air, which appeared to grow thinner and more irrespirable, he rushed toward it. Hundreds, thousands of those black, glaciated steps he seemed to climb before he neared the light. He came out beneath a sable heaven

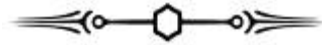
crowded with chill, pulseless, glaring stars, in a sort of valley-bottom among drear unending scarps and pinnacles, still and silent as a frozen dream of death. They gleamed in the starlight with reflections of myriad-angled ice; and the valley-bottom itself was lit by patches of a leprons whiteness. One of these patches fringed the mouth of the incline on whose topmost step the earth-man was standing.

He fought agonizingly for breath in the tenuous infra-zero air and his body stiffened momentarily with a permeating rigor as he stood and peered in numb bewilderment at the icy, mountainous chaos of the landscape in which he had emerged. It was like a dead crater in a world of unspeakable and perpetual desolation, where life could never have been.

The flowing blood had congealed upon his brow and cheeks. With glazing eyes, he saw, in a nearby cliff, the continuation of the cavern-steps. Hewn for some unimaginable purpose by the Immortals, they ran upward in the ice toward the higher summits.

It was not the familiar twilight zone of Mercury in which he had come forth — it was the bleak, nightward side, eternally averted from the sun, and blasted with the frightful cold of cosmic space. He felt the pinnacles and chasms close him in, relentless and rigid, like some hyperborean hell. Then the realization of his plight became something very remote and recessive, a dim thought that floated above his ebbing consciousness. He fell forward on the snow with limbs already stiff and unbending; and the mercy of the final numbness grew complete.

The Maker of Gargoyles



AMONG THE MANY gargoyles that frowned or leered from the roof of the new-built cathedral of Vyones, two were pre-eminent above the rest by virtue of their fine workmanship and their supreme grotesquery. These two had been wrought by the stone-carver Blaise Reynard, a native of Vyones, who had lately returned from a long sojourn in the cities of Provence, and had secured employment on the cathedral when the three years' task of its construction and ornamentation was well-nigh completed. In view of the wonderful artistry shown by Reynard, it was regretted by Ambrosius, the archbishop, that it had not been possible to commit the execution of all the gargoyles to this delicate and accomplished workman; but other people, with less liberal tastes than Ambrosius, were heard to express a different opinion.

This opinion, perhaps, was tinged by the personal dislike that had been generally felt toward Reynard in Vyones even from his boyhood; and which had been revived with some virulence on his return. Whether rightly or unjustly, his very physiognomy had always marked him out for public disfavor: he was inordinately dark, with hair and beard of a preternatural bluish-black, and slanting, ill-matched eyes that gave him a sinister and cunning air. His taciturn and saturnine ways were such as a superstitious people would identify with necromantic knowledge or complicity; and there were those who covertly accused him of being in league with Satan; though the accusations were little more than vague, anonymous rumors, even to the end, through lack of veritable evidence.

However, the people who suspected Reynard of diabolic affiliations were wont for awhile to instance the two gargoyles as sufficient proof. No man, they contended, who was not inspired by the Arch-Enemy, could have carven anything so sheerly evil and malignant, could have embodied so consummately in mere stone the living lineaments of the most demoniacal of all the deadly Sins.

The two gargoyles were perched on opposite corners of a high tower of the cathedral. One was a snarling, murderous, cat-headed monster, with retracted lips revealing formidable fangs, and eyes that glared intolerable hatred from beneath ferine brows. This creature had the claws and wings of a griffin, and seemed as if it were poised in readiness to swoop down on the city of Vyones, like a harpy on its prey. Its companion was a horned satyr, with the vans of some great bat such as might roam the nether caverns, with sharp, clenching talons, and a look of Satanically brooding lust, as if it were gloating above the helpless object of its unclean desire. Both figures were complete, even to the hindquarters, and were not mere conventional adjuncts of the roof. One would have expected them to start at any moment from the stone in which they were mortised.

Ambrosius, a lover of art, had been openly delighted with these creations, because of their high technical merit and their verisimilitude as works of sculpture. But others, including many humbler dignitaries of the Church, were more or less scandalized, and said that the workman had informed these figures with the visible likeness of his own vices, to the glory of Belial rather than of God, and had thus perpetrated a sort of blasphemy. Of course, they admitted, a certain amount of grotesquery was requisite in gargoyles; but in this case the allowable bounds had been egregiously overpassed.

However, with the completion of the cathedral, and in spite of all this adverse criticism, the high-poised gargoyles of Blaise Reynard, like all other details of the building, were soon taken for granted through mere everyday familiarity; and eventually they were almost forgotten. The scandal of opposition died down, and the stone-carver himself, though the townsfolk continued to eye him askance, was able to secure other work through the favor of discriminating patrons. He remained in Vyon; and paid his addresses, albeit without visible success, to a taverner's daughter, one Nicolette Villom, of whom, it was said, he had long been enamoured in his own surly and reticent fashion.

But Reynard himself had not forgotten the gargoyles. Often, in passing the superb pile of the cathedral, he would gaze up at them with a secret satisfaction whose cause he could hardly have assigned or delimited. They seemed to retain for him a rare and mystical meaning, to signalize an obscure but pleasurable triumph.

He would have said, if asked for the reason of his satisfaction, that he was proud of a skilful piece of handiwork. He would not have said, and perhaps would not even have known, that in one of the gargoyles he had imprisoned all his festering rancor, all his answering spleen and hatred toward the people of Vyon, who had always hated him; and had set the image of this rancor to peer venomously down for ever from a lofty place. And perhaps he would not even have dreamt that in the second gargoyle he had somehow expressed his own dour and satyr-like passion for the girl Nicolette — a passion that had brought him back to the detested city of his youth after years of wandering; a passion singularly tenacious of one object, and differing in this regard from the ordinary lusts of a nature so brutal as Reynard's.

Always to the stone-cutter, even more than to those who had criticized and abhorred his productions, the gargoyles were alive, they possessed a vitality and a sentiency of their own. And most of all did they seem to live when the summer drew to an end and the autumn rains had gathered upon Vyones. Then, when the full cathedral gutters poured above the streets, one might have thought that the actual spittle of a foul malevolence, the very slaver of an impure lust, had somehow been mingled with the water that ran in rills from the mouths of the gargoyles.

2

At that time, in the year of our Lord, 1138, Vyones was the principal town of the province of Averroigne. On two sides the great, shadow-haunted forest, a place of equivocal legends, of loups-garous and phantoms, approached to the very walls and flung its umbrage upon them at early forenoon and evening. On the other sides there lay cultivated fields, and gentle streams that meandered among willows or poplars, and roads that ran through an open plain to the high châteaux of noble lords and to regions beyond Averroigne.

The town itself was prosperous, and had never shared in the ill-fame of the bordering forest. It had long been sanctified by the presence of two nunneries and a monastery; and now, with the completion of the long-planned cathedral, it was thought that Vyones would have henceforward the additional protection of a more august holiness; that demon and stryge and incubus would keep their distance from its heaven-favored purlieus with a more meticulous caution than before.

Of course, as in all mediæval towns, there had been occasional instances of alleged sorcery or demoniacal possession; and, once or twice, the perilous temptations of succubi had made their inroads on the pious virtue

of Vyones. But this was nothing more than might be expected, in a world where the Devil and his works were always more or less rampant. No one could possibly have anticipated the reign of infernal horrors that was to make hideous the latter month of autumn, following the cathedral's erection.

To make the matter even more inexplicable, and more blasphemously dreadful than it would otherwise have been, the first of these horrors occurred in the neighborhood of the cathedral itself and almost beneath its sheltering shadow.

Two men, a respectable clothier named Guillaume Maspier and an equally reputable cooper, one Gerome Mazzal, were returning to their lodgings in the late hours of a November eve, after imbibing both the red and white wines of the countryside in more than one tavern. According to Maspier, who alone survived to tell the tale, they were passing along a street that skirted the cathedral square, and could see the bulk of the great building against the stars, when a flying monster, black as the soot of Abaddon, had descended upon them from the heavens and assailed Gerome Mazzal, beating him down with its heavily flapping wings and seizing him with its inch-long teeth and talons.

Maspier was unable to describe the creature with minuteness, for he had seen it but dimly and partially in the unlit street; and moreover, the fate of his companion, who had fallen to the cobblestones with the black devil snarling and tearing at his throat, had not induced Maspier to linger in that vicinity. He had betaken himself from the scene with all the celerity of which he was capable, and had stopped only at the house of a priest, many streets away, where he had related his adventure between shudderings and hiccuppings.

Armed with holy water and aspergillus, and accompanied by many of the townspeople carrying torches, staves and halberds, the priest was led by Maspier to the place of the horror; and there they had found the body of Mazzal, with fearfully mangled face, and throat and bosom lined with bloody lacerations. The demoniac assailant had flown, and it was not seen or encountered again that night; but those who had beheld its work returned aghast to their homes, feeling that a creature of nethermost hell had come to visit the city, and perchance to abide therein.

Consternation was rife on the morrow, when the story became generally known; and rites of exorcism against the invading demon were performed by the clergy in all public places and before thresholds. But the sprinkling of holy water and the mumbling of stated forms were futile; for the evil spirit was still abroad, and its malignity was proved once more, on the night following the ghastly death of Gerome Mazzal.

This time, it claimed two victims, burghers of high probity and some consequence, on whom it descended in a narrow alley, slaying one of them instantaneously, and dragging down the other from behind as he sought to flee. The shrill cries of the helpless men, and the guttural growling of the demon, were heard by people in the houses along the alley; and some, who were hardy enough to peer from their windows, had seen the departure of the infamous assailant, blotting out the autumn stars with the sable and misshapen foulness of its wings, and hovering in execrable menace above the house-tops.

After this, few people would venture abroad at night, unless in case of dire and exigent need; and those who did venture went in armed companies and were all furnished with flambeaux, thinking thus to frighten away the demon, which they adjudged a creature of darkness that would abhor the light and shrink therefrom, through the nature of its kind. But the boldness

of this fiend was beyond measure; for it proceeded to attack more than one company of worthy citizens, disregarding the flaring torches that were thrust in its face, or putting them out with the stenchful wind of its wide vans.

Evidently it was a spirit of homicidal hate; for all the people on whom it seized were grievously mangled or torn to numberless shreds by its teeth and talons. Those who saw it, and survived, were wont to describe it variously and with much ambiguity; but all agreed in attributing to it the head of a ferocious animal and the wings of a monstrous bird. Some, the most learned in demonology, were fain to identify it with Modo, the spirit of murder; and others took it for one of the great lieutenants of Satan, perhaps Amaimon or Alastor, gone mad with exasperation at the impregnable supremacy of Christ in the holy city of Vyon.

The terror that soon prevailed, beneath the widening scope of these Satanical incursions and depredations, was beyond all belief — a clotted, seething, devil-ridden gloom of superstitious obsession, not to be hinted in modern language. Even by daylight, the Gothic wings of nightmare seemed to brood in undeparting oppression above the city; and fear was everywhere, like the foul contagion of some epidemic plague. The inhabitants went their way in prayer and trembling; and the archbishop himself, as well as the subordinate clergy, confessed an inability to cope with the ever-growing horror. An emissary was sent to Rome, to procure water that had been specially sanctified by the Pope. This alone, it was thought, would be efficacious enough to drive away the dreadful visitant.

In the meanwhile, the horror waxed, and mounted to its culmination. One eve, toward the middle of November, the abbot of the local monastery of Cordeliers, who had gone forth to administer extreme unction to a dying friend, was seized by the black devil just as he approached the threshold of

his destination, and was slain in the same atrocious manner as the other victims.

To this doubly infamous deed, a scarce-believable blasphemy was soon added. On the very next night, while the torn body of the abbot lay on a rich catafalque in the cathedral, and masses were being said and tapers burnt, the demon invaded the high nave through the open door, extinguished all the candles with one flap of its sooty wings, and dragged down no less than three of the officiating priests to an unholy death in the darkness.

Every one now felt that a truly formidable assault was being made by the powers of Evil on the Christian probity of Vyones. In the condition of abject terror, of extreme disorder and demoralization that followed upon this new atrocity, there was a deplorable outbreak of human crime, of murder and rapine and thievery, together with covert manifestations of Satanism, and celebrations of the Black Mass attended by many neophytes.

Then, in the midst of all this pandemoniacal fear and confusion, it was rumored that a second devil had been seen in Vyones; that the murderous fiend was accompanied by a spirit of equal deformity and darkness, whose intentions were those of lechery, and which molested none but women. This creature had frightened several dames and demoiselles and maid-servants into a veritable hysteria by peering through their bedroom windows; and had sidled lasciviously, with uncouth mows and grimaces, and grotesque flappings of its bat-shaped wings, toward others who had occasion to fare from house to house across the nocturnal streets.

However, strange to say, there were no authentic instances in which the chastity of any woman had suffered actual harm from this noisome incubus. Many were approached by it, and were terrified immoderately by the hideousness and lustfulness of its demeanour; but no one was ever touched. Even in that time of horror, both spiritual and corporeal, there were those

who made a ribald jest of this singular abstention on the part of the demon, and said that it was seeking throughout Vyones for some one whom it had not yet found.

3

The lodgings of Blaise Reynard were separated only by the length of a dark and crooked alley from the tavern kept by Jean Villom, the father of Nicolette. In this tavern, Reynard had been wont to spend his evenings; though his suit was frowned upon by Jean Villom, and had received but scant encouragement from the girl herself. However, because of his well-filled purse and his almost illimitable capacity for wine, Reynard was tolerated. He came early each night, with the falling of darkness, and would sit in silence hour after hour, staring with hot and sullen eyes at Nicolette, and gulping joylessly the potent vintages of Averoine. Apart from their desire to retain his custom, the people of the tavern were a little afraid of him, on account of his dubious and semi-sorcerous reputation, and also because of his surly temper. They did not wish to antagonize him more than was necessary.

Like everyone else in Vyones, Reynard had felt the suffocating burden of superstitious terror during those nights when the fiendish marauder was hovering above the town and might descend on the luckless wayfarer at any moment, in any locality. Nothing less urgent and imperative than the obsession of his half-bestial longing for Nicolette could have induced him to traverse after dark the length of that winding alley to the tavern door.

The autumn nights had been moonless. Now, on the evening that followed the desecration of the cathedral itself by the murderous devil, a new-born crescent was lowering its fragile, sanguine-colored horn beyond the house-tops as Reynard went forth from his lodgings at the accustomed

hour. He lost sight of its comforting beam in the high-walled and narrow alley, and shivered with dread as he hastened onward through shadows that were dissipated only by the rare and timid ray from some lofty window. It seemed to him, at each turn and angle, that the gloom was curded by the unclean umbrage of Satanic wings, and might reveal in another instant the gleaming of abhorrent eyes ignited by the everlasting coals of the Pit. When he came forth at the alley's end, he saw with a start of fresh panic that the crescent moon was blotted out by a cloud that had the semblance of uncouthly arched and pointed vans.

He reached the tavern with a sense of supreme relief, for he had begun to feel a distinct intuition that someone or something was following him, unheard and invisible — a presence that seemed to load the dusk with prodigious menace. He entered, and closed the door behind him very quickly, as if he were shutting it in the face of a dread pursuer.

There were few people in the tavern that evening. The girl Nicolette was serving wine to a mercer's assistant, one Raoul Coupain, a personable youth and a newcomer in the neighborhood, and she was laughing with what Reynard considered unseemly gayety at the broad jests and amorous sallies of this Raoul. Jean Villom was discussing in a low voice the latest enormities of the demons with two cronies at a table in the farthest corner, and was drinking fully as much liquor as his customers.

Glowering with jealousy at the presence of Raoul Coupain, whom he suspected of being a favored rival, Reynard seated himself in silence and stared malignly at the flirtatious couple. No one seemed to have noticed his entrance; for Villom went on talking to his cronies without pause or interruption, and Nicolette and her companion were equally oblivious. To his jealous rage, Reynard soon added the resentment of one who feels that

he is being deliberately ignored. He began to pound on the table with his heavy fists, to attract attention.

Villom, who had been sitting all the while with his back turned, now called out to Nicolette without even troubling to face around on his stool, telling her to serve Reynard. Giving a backward smile at Coupain, she came slowly and with open reluctance to the stone-carver's table.

She was small and buxom, with reddish-gold hair that curled luxuriantly above the short, delicious oval of her face; and she was gowned in a tight-fitting dress of apple-green that revealed the firm, seductive outlines of her hips and bosom. Her air was disdainful and a little cold, for she did not like Reynard and had taken small pains at any time to conceal her aversion. But to Reynard she was lovelier and more desirable than ever, and he felt a savage impulse to seize her in his arms and carry her bodily away from the tavern before the eyes of Raoul Coupain and her father.

"Bring me a pitcher of La Frênaie," he ordered gruffly, in a voice that betrayed his mingled resentment and desire.

Tossing her head lightly and scornfully, with more glances at Coupain, the girl obeyed. She placed the fiery, blood-dark wine before Reynard without speaking, and then went back to resume her bantering with the mercer's assistant.

Reynard began to drink, and the potent vintage merely served to inflame his smoldering enmity and passion. His eyes became venomous, his curling lips malignant as those of the gargoyles he had carved on the new cathedral. A baleful, primordial anger, like the rage of some morose and thwarted faun, burned within him with its slow red fire; but he strove to repress it, and sat silent and motionless, except for the frequent filling and emptying of his wine-cup.

Raoul Coupain had also consumed a liberal quantity of wine. As a result, he soon became bolder in his love-making, and strove to kiss the hand of Nicolette, who had now seated herself on the bench beside him. The hand was playfully withheld; and then, after its owner had cuffed Raoul very lightly and briskly, was granted to the claimant in a fashion that struck Reynard as being no less than wanton.

Snarling inarticulately, with a mad impulse to rush forward and slay the successful rival with his bare hands, he started to his feet and stepped toward the playful pair. His movement was noted by one of the men in the far corner, who spoke warningly to Villom. The tavern-keeper arose, lurching a little from his potations, and came warily across the room with his eyes on Reynard, ready to interfere in case of violence.

Reynard paused with momentary irresolution, and then went on, half insane with a mounting hatred for them all. He longed to kill Villom and Coupain, to kill the hateful cronies who sat staring from the corner; and then, above their throttled corpses, to ravage with fierce kisses and vehement caresses the shrinking lips and body of Nicolette.

Seeing the approach of the stone-carver, and knowing his evil temper and dark jealousy, Coupain also rose to his feet and plucked stealthily beneath his cloak at the hilt of a little dagger which he carried. In the meanwhile, Jean Villom had interposed his burly bulk between the rivals. For the sake of the tavern's good repute, he wished to prevent the possible brawl.

"Back to your table, stone-cutter," he roared belligerently at Reynard.

Being unarmed, and seeing himself outnumbered, Reynard paused again, though his anger still simmered within him like the contents of a sorcerer's cauldron. With ruddy points of murderous flame in his hollow, slitted eyes, he glared at the three people before him, and saw beyond them, with

instinctive rather than conscious awareness, the leaded panes of the tavern window, in whose glass the room was dimly reflected with its glowing tapers, its glimmering tableware, the heads of Coupain and Villom and the girl Nicolette, and his own shadowy face among them.

Strangely, and, it would seem, inconsequently, he remembered at that moment the dark, ambiguous cloud he had seen across the moon, and the insistent feeling of obscure pursuit while he had traversed the alley.

Then, as he still gazed irresolutely at the group before him, and its vague reflection in the glass beyond, there came a thunderous crash, and the panes of the window with their pictured scene were shattered inward in a score of fragments. Ere the litter of falling glass had reached the tavern floor, a swart and monstrous form flew into the room, with a beating of heavy vans that caused the tapers to flare troublously, and the shadows to dance like a sabbat of misshapen devils. The thing hovered for a moment, and seemed to tower in a great darkness higher than the ceiling above the heads of Reynard and the others as they turned toward it. They saw the malignant burning of its eyes, like coals in the depth of Tartarean pits, and the curling of its hateful lips on the bared teeth that were longer and sharper than serpent-fangs.

Behind it now, another shadowy flying monster came in through the broken window with a loud flapping of its ribbed and pointed wings. There was something lascivious in the very motion of its flight, even as homicidal hatred and malignity were manifest in the flight of the other. Its satyr-like face was twisted in a horrible, never-changing leer, and its lustful eyes were fixed upon Nicolette as it hung in air beside the first intruder.

Reynard, as well as the other men, was petrified by a feeling of astonishment and consternation so extreme as almost to preclude terror. Voiceless and motionless, they beheld the demoniac intrusion; and the

consternation of Reynard, in particular, was mingled with an element of unspeakable surprize, together with a dreadful recognizance. But the girl Nicolette, with a mad scream of horror, turned and started to flee across the room.

As if her cry had been the one provocation needed, the two demons swooped upon their victims. One, with a ferocious slash of its outstretched claws, tore open the throat of Jean Villom, who fell with a gurgling, blood-choked groan; and then, in the same fashion, it assailed Raoul Coupain. The other, in the meanwhile, had pursued and overtaken the fleeing girl, and had seized her in its bestial forearms, with the ribbed wings enfolding her like a hellish drapery.

The room was filled by a moaning whirlwind, by a chaos of wild cries and tossing, struggling shadows. Reynard heard the guttural snarling of the murderous monster, muffled by the body of Coupain, whom it was tearing with its teeth; and he heard the lubricous laughter of the incubus, above the shrieks of the hysterically frightened girl. Then the grotesquely flaring tapers went out in a gust of swirling air, and Reynard received a violent blow in the darkness — the blow of some rushing object, perhaps of a passing wing, that was hard and heavy as stone. He fell, and became insensible.

Dully and confusedly, with much effort, Reynard struggled back to consciousness. For a brief interim, he could not remember where he was nor what had happened. He was troubled by the painful throbbing of his head, by the humming of agitated voices about him, by the glaring of many lights and the thronging of many faces when he opened his eyes; and, above all,

by the sense of nameless but grievous calamity and uttermost horror that weighed him down from the first dawning of sentience.

Memory returned to him, laggard and reluctant; and with it, a full awareness of his surroundings and situation. He was lying on the tavern floor, and his own warm, sticky blood was rilling across his face from the wound on his aching head. The long room was half filled with people of the neighborhood, bearing torches and knives and halberds, who had entered and were peering at the corpses of Villom and Coupain, which lay amid pools of wine-diluted blood and the wreckage of the shattered furniture and tableware.

Nicolette, with her green gown in shreds, and her body crushed by the embraces of the demon, was moaning feebly while women crowded about her with ineffectual cries and questions which she could not even hear or understand. The two cronies of Villom, horribly clawed and mangled, were dead beside their overturned table.

Stupefied with horror, and still dizzy from the blow that had laid him unconscious, Reynard staggered to his feet, and found himself surrounded at once by inquiring faces and voices. Some of the people were a little suspicious of him, since he was the sole survivor in the tavern, and bore an ill repute; but his replies to their questions soon convinced them that the new crime was wholly the work of the same demons that had plagued Vyones in so monstrous a fashion for weeks past.

Reynard, however, was unable to tell them all that he had seen, or to confess the ultimate sources of his fear and stupefaction. The secret of that which he knew was locked in the seething pit of his tortured and devil-ridden soul.

Somehow, he left the ravaged inn, he pushed his way through the gathering crowd with its terror-muted murmurs, and found himself alone on

the midnight streets. Heedless of his own possible peril, and scarcely knowing where he went, he wandered through Vyonès for many hours; and somehow in his wanderings, he came to his own workshop. With no assignable reason for the act, he entered, and re-emerged with a heavy hammer, which he carried with him during his subsequent peregrinations. Then, driven by his awful and unremissive torture, he went on till the pale dawn had touched the spires and the house-tops with a ghostly glimmering.

By a half-conscious compulsion, his steps had led him to the square before the cathedral. Ignoring the amazed verger, who had just opened the doors, he entered and sought a stairway that wound tortuously upward to the tower on which his own gargoyles were ensconced.

In the chill and livid light of sunless morning, he emerged on the roof; and leaning perilously from the verge, he examined the carved figures. He felt no surprise, only the hideous confirmation of a fear too ghastly to be named, when he saw that the teeth and claws of the malign, cat-headed griffin were stained with darkening blood; and that shreds of apple-green cloth were hanging from the talons of the lustful, bat-winged satyr.

It seemed to Reynard, in the dim ashen light, that a look of unspeakable triumph, of intolerable irony, was imprinted on the face of this latter creature. He stared at it with fearful and agonizing fascination, while impotent rage, abhorrence, and repentance deeper than that of the damned arose within him in a smothering flood. He was hardly aware that he had raised the iron hammer and had struck wildly at the satyr's horned profile, till he heard the sullen, angry clang of impact, and found that he was tottering on the edge of the roof to retain his balance.

The furious blow had merely chipped the features of the gargoyle, and had not wiped away the malignant lust and exultation. Again Reynard raised the heavy hammer.

It fell on empty air; for, even as he struck, the stone-carver felt himself lifted and drawn backward by something that sank into his flesh like many separate knives. He staggered helplessly, his feet slipped, and then he was lying on the granite verge, with his head and shoulders over the dark, deserted street.

Half swooning, and sick with pain, he saw above him the other gargoyle, the claws of whose right foreleg were firmly embedded in his shoulder. They tore deeper, as if with a dreadful clenching. The monster seemed to tower like some fabulous beast above its prey; and he felt himself slipping dizzily across the cathedral gutter, with the gargoyle twisting and turning as if to resume its normal position over the gulf. Its slow, inexorable movement seemed to be part of his vertigo. The very tower was tilting and revolving beneath him in some unnatural nightmare fashion.

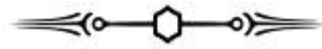
Dimly, in a daze of fear and agony, Reynard saw the remorseless tiger-face bending toward him with its horrid teeth laid bare in an eternal rictus of diabolic hate. Somehow, he had retained the hammer. With an instinctive impulse to defend himself, he struck at the gargoyle, whose cruel features seemed to approach him like something seen in the ultimate madness and distortion of delirium.

Even as he struck, the vertiginous turning movement continued, and he felt the talons dragging him outward on empty air. In his cramped, recumbent position, the blow fell short of the hateful face and came down with a dull clangor on the foreleg whose curving talons were fixed in his shoulder like meat-hooks. The clangor ended in a sharp cracking sound; and the leaning gargoyle vanished from Reynard's vision as he fell. He saw nothing more, except the dark mass of the cathedral tower, that seemed to soar away from him and to rush upward unbelievably in the livid, starless heavens to which the belated sun had not yet risen.

It was the archbishop Ambrosius, on his way to early mass, who found the shattered body of Reynard lying face downward in the square. Ambrosius crossed himself in startled horror at the sight; and then, when he saw the object that was still clinging to Reynard's shoulder, he repeated the gesture with a more than pious promptness.

He bent down to examine the thing. With the infallible memory of a true art-lover, he recognized it at once. Then, through the same clearness of recollection, he saw that the stone foreleg, whose claws were so deeply buried in Reynard's flesh, had somehow undergone a most unnatural alteration. The paw, as he remembered it, should have been slightly bent and relaxed; but now it was stiffly outthrust and elongated, as if, like the paw of a living limb, it had reached for something, or had dragged a heavy burden with its ferine talons.

Master of the Asteroid



MAN'S CONQUEST OF the interplanetary gulfs has been fraught with many tragedies. Vessel after vessel, like venturous motes, disappeared in the infinite — and had not returned. Inevitably, for the most part, the lost explorers have left no record of their fate. Their ships have flared as unknown meteors through the atmosphere of the further planets, to fall like shapeless metal cinders on a never-visited terrain; or have become the dead, frozen satellites of other worlds or moons. A few, perhaps, among the unreturning fliers, have succeeded in landing somewhere, and their crews have perished immediately, or survived for a little while amid the inconceivably hostile environment of a cosmos not designed for men.

In later years, with the progress of exploration, more than one of the early derelicts has been descried, following a solitary orbit; and the wrecks of others have been found on ultraterrene shores. Occasionally — not often — it has been possible to reconstruct the details of the lone, remote disaster. Sometimes, in a fused and twisted hull, a log or record has been preserved intact. Among others, there is the case of the *Selenite*, the first known rocket ship to dare the zone of the asteroids.

At the time of its disappearance, fifty years ago, in 1980, a dozen voyages had been made to Mars, and a rocket base had been established in Syrtis Major, with a small permanent colony of terrestrials, all of whom were trained scientists as well as men of uncommon hardihood and physical stamina.

The effects of the Martian climate, and the utter alienation from familiar conditions, as might have been expected, were extremely trying and even

disastrous. There was an unremitting struggle with deadly or pestiferous bacteria new to science, a perpetual assailment by dangerous radiations of soil, and air and sun. The lessened gravity played its part also, in contributing to curious and profound disturbances of metabolism.

The worst effects were nervous and mental. Queer, irrational animosities, manias or phobias never classified by alienists, began to develop among the personnel at the rocket base.

Violent quarrels broke out between men who were normally controlled and urbane. The party, numbering fifteen in all, soon divided into several cliques, one against the others; and this morbid antagonism led at times to actual fighting and even bloodshed.

One of the cliques consisted of three men, Roger Colt, Phil Gershom and Edmond Beverly. These three, through banding together in a curious fashion, became intolerably antisocial toward all the others. It would seem that they must have gone close to the borderline of insanity, and were subject to actual delusions. At any rate, they conceived the idea that Mars, with its fifteen Earthmen, was entirely too crowded. Voicing this idea in a most offensive and belligerent manner, they also began to hint their intention of faring even further afield in space.

Their hints were not taken seriously by the others, since a crew of three was insufficient for the proper manning of even the lightest rocket vessel used at that time. Colt, Gershom and Beverly had no difficulty at all in stealing the *Selenite*, the smaller of the two ships then reposing at the Syrtis Major base. Their fellow-colonists were aroused one night by the cannon-like roar of the discharging tubes, and emerged from their huts of sheet-iron in time to see the vessel departing in a fiery streak toward Jupiter.

No attempt was made to follow it; but the incident helped to sober the remaining twelve and to calm their unnatural animosities. It was believed,

from certain remarks that the malcontents had let drop, that their particular objective was Ganymede or Europa, both of which were thought to possess an atmosphere suitable for human respiration.

It seemed very doubtful, however, that they could pass the perilous belt of the asteroids. Apart from the difficulty of steering a course amid these innumerable far-strewn bodies, the *Selenite* was not fuelled or provisioned for a voyage of such length. Gershom, Colt and Beverly, in their mad haste to quit the company of the others, had forgotten to calculate the actual necessities of their proposed voyage, and had wholly overlooked its dangers.

After that departing flash on the Martian skies, the *Selenite* was not seen again; and its fate remained a mystery for thirty years. Then, on tiny, remote Phocea, its dented wreck was found by the Holdane expedition to the asteroids.

Phocea, at the time of the expedition's visit, was in aphelion. Like others of the planetoids, it was discovered to possess a rare atmosphere, too thin for human breathing. Both hemispheres were covered with thin snow; and lying amid this snow, the *Selenite* was sighted by the explorers as they circled about the little world.

Much interest prevailed, for the shape of the partially bare mound was plainly recognizable and not to be confused with the surrounding rocks. Holdane ordered a landing, and several men in space suits proceeded to examine the wreck. They soon identified it as the long-missing *Selenite*.

Peering in through one of the thick, unbreakable neocrystal ports, they met the eyeless gaze of a human skeleton, which had fallen forward against the slanting, overhanging wall. It seemed to grin a sardonic welcome. The vessel's hull was partly buried in the stony soil, and had been crumpled and even slightly fused, though not broken, by its plunge. The manhole lid was

so thoroughly jammed and soldered that it was impossible to effect an entrance without the use of a cutting-torch.

Enormous, withered, cryptogamous plants with the habit of vines, that crumbled at a touch, were clinging to the hull and the adjacent rocks. In the light snow beneath the skeleton-guarded port, a number of sharded bodies were lying, which proved to be those of tall insect forms, like giant *phasmidae*.

From the posture and arrangement of their lank, pipy members, longer than those of a man, it seemed that they had walked erect. They were unimaginably grotesque, and their composition, due to the almost non-existent gravity, was fantastically porous and unsubstantial. Many other bodies, of a similar type, were afterwards found on other portions of the planetoid, but no living thing was discovered. All life, it was plain, had perished in the trans-arctic winter of Phocea's aphelion.

When the *Selenite* had been entered, the party learned from a sort of log or notebook found on the floor, that the skeleton was all that remained of Edmond Beverly. There was no trace of his two companions; but the log, on examination, proved to contain a record of their fate as well as the subsequent adventures of Beverly almost to the very moment of his own death from a doubtful, unexplained cause.

The tale was a strange and tragic one. Beverly, it would seem, had written it day by day, after the departure from Syrtis Major, in an effort to retain a semblance of morale and mental coherence amid the black alienation and disorientation of infinitude. I transcribe it herewith, omitting only the earlier passages, which were full of unimportant details and personal animadversions. The first entries were all dated, and Beverly had made an heroic attempt to measure and mark off the seasonless night of the void in terms of earthly time. But after the disastrous landing on Phocea, he

had abandoned this; and the actual length of time covered by his entries can only be conjectured. —

* * *

Sept. 10th. Mars is only a pale-red star through our rear ports; and according to my calculations we will soon approach the orbit of the nearest asteroids. Jupiter and its system of moons are seemingly as far off as ever, like beacons on the unattainable shore of immensity. More even than at first, I feel that dreadful suffocation illusion, which accompanies ether-travel, of being perfectly stationary in a static void.

Gershom, however, complains of a disturbance of equilibrium, with much vertigo and a frequent sense of falling, as if the vessel were sinking beneath him through bottomless space at a headlong speed. The causation of such symptoms is rather obscure, since the artificial gravity regulators are in good working order. Colt and I have not suffered from any similar disturbance. It seems to me that the sense of falling would be almost a relief from this illusion of nightmare immobility; but Gershom appears to be greatly distressed by it, and says that his hallucination is growing stronger, with fewer and briefer intervals of normalcy. He fears that it will become continuous.

* * *

Sept. 11th. Colt has made an estimate of our fuel and provisions and thinks that with careful husbandry we will be able to reach Europa. I have been checking up on his calculations, and find that he is altogether too sanguine. According to my estimate, the fuel will give out while we are still midway in the belt of the asteroids; though the food, water and compressed air would possibly take us most of the way to Europa.

This discovery I must conceal from the others. It is too late to turn back. I wonder if we have all been mad, to start out on this errant voyage into cosmical immensity with no real preparation or thought of consequences. Colt, it would seem, has lost the power of mathematical calculation: his figures are full of the most egregious errors.

Gershom has been unable to sleep, and is not even fit to take his turn at the watch. The hallucination of falling obsesses him perpetually, and he cries out in terror, thinking that the vessel is about to crash on some dark, unknown planet to which it is being drawn by an irresistible gravitation. Eating, drinking and locomotion are very difficult for him, and he complains that he cannot even draw a full breath — that the air is snatched away from him in his precipitate descent. His condition is indeed painful and pitiable.

* * *

Sept. 12th. Gershom is worse — bromide of potassium and even a heavy dose of morphine from the *Selenite's* medicine lockers, have not relieved him or enabled him to sleep. He has the look of a drowning man and seems to be on the point of strangulation. It is hard for him to speak.

Colt has become very morose and sullen, and snarls at me when I address him. I think that Gershom's plight has preyed sorely upon his nerves — as it has on mine. But my burden is heavier than Colt's: for I know the inevitable doom of our insane and ill-starred expedition. Sometimes I wish it were all over... The hells of the human mind are vaster than space, darker than the night between the worlds...and all three of us have spent several eternities in hell. Our attempt to flee has only plunged us into a black and shoreless limbo, through which we are fated to carry still our own private perdition.

I, too, like Gershom, have been unable to sleep. But, unlike him, I am tormented by the illusion of eternal immobility. In spite of the daily calculations that assure me of our progress through the gulf, I cannot convince myself that we have moved at all. It seems to me that we hang suspended like Mohammed's coffin, remote from earth and equally remote from the stars, in an incommensurable vastness without bourn or direction. I cannot describe the awfulness of the feeling.

* * *

Sept. 13th. During my watch, Colt opened the medicine locker and managed to shoot himself full of morphine. When his turn came, he was in a stupor and I could do nothing to rouse him. Gershom had gotten steadily worse and seemed to be enduring a thousand deaths so there was nothing for me to do but keep on with the watch as long as I could. I locked the controls, anyway, so that the vessel would continue its course without human guidance if I should fall asleep.

I don't know how long I kept awake — nor how long I slept. I was aroused by a queer hissing whose nature and cause I could not identify at first. I looked around and saw that Colt was in his hammock, still lying in a drug-induced sopor. Then I saw that Gershom was gone, and began to realize that the hissing came from the air-lock. The inner door of the lock was closed securely — but evidently someone had opened the outer manhole, and the sound was being made by the escaping air. It grew fainter and ceased as I listened.

I knew then what had happened — Gershom, unable to endure his strange hallucination any longer, had actually flung himself into space from the *Selenite*! Going to the rear ports, I saw his body, with a pale, slightly bloated face and open, bulging eyes. It was following us like a satellite,

keeping an even distance of ten or twelve feet from the lee of the vessel's stern. I could have gone out in a space suit to retrieve the body; but I felt sure that Gershom was already dead, and the effort seemed more than useless. Since there was no leakage of air from the interior, I did not even try to close the manhole.

I hope and pray that Gershom is at peace. He will float forever in cosmic space — and in that further void where the torment of human consciousness can never follow.

* * *

Sept. 15th. We have kept our course somehow, though Colt is too demoralized and drug-sodden to be of much assistance. I pity him when the limited supply of morphine gives out.

Gershom's body is still following us, held by the slight power of the vessel's gravitational attraction. It seems to terrify Colt in his more lucid moments; and he complains that we are being haunted by the dead man. It's bad enough for me, too, and I wonder how much my nerves and mind will stand. Sometimes I think that I am beginning to develop the delusion that tortured Gershom and drove him to his death. An awful dizziness assails me, and I fear that I shall start to fall. But somehow I regain my equilibrium.

* * *

Sept. 16th. Colt used up all the morphine, and began to show signs of intense depression and uncontrollable nervousness. His fear of the satellite corpse appeared to grow upon him like an obsession; and I could do nothing to reassure him. His terror was deepened by an eerie, superstitious belief.

“I tell you, I hear Gershom calling us,” he cried. “He wants company, out there in the black, frozen emptiness; and he won’t leave the vessel till one of us goes out to join him. You’ve got to go, Beverly — it’s either you or me — otherwise he’ll follow the *Selenite* forever.”

I tried to reason with him, but in vain. He turned upon me in a sudden shift of maniacal rage.

“Damn you, I’ll throw you out, if you won’t go any other way!” he shrieked.

Clawing and mouthing like a mad beast, he leaped toward me where I sat before the *Selenite*’s control-board. I was almost overborne by his onset, for he fought with a wild and frantic strength. I don’t like to write down all that happened, for the mere recollection makes me sick. Finally he got me by the throat, with a sharp-nailed clutch that I could not loosen and began to choke me to death. In self-defense, I had to shoot him with an automatic which I carried in my pocket. Reeling dizzily, gasping for breath, I found myself staring down at his prostrate body, from which a crimson puddle was widening on the floor.

Somehow, I managed to put on a space suit. Dragging Colt by the ankles, I got him to the inner door of the air-lock. When I opened the door, the escaping air hurled me toward the open manhole together with the corpse; and it was hard to regain my footing and avoid being carried through into space. Colt’s body, turning transversely in its movement, was jammed across the manhole; and I had to thrust it out with my hands. Then I closed the lid after it. When I returned to the ship’s interior, I saw it floating, pale and bloated, beside the corpse of Gershom.

* * *

Sept. 17th. I am alone — and yet most horribly I am pursued and companioned by the dead men. I have sought to concentrate my faculties on the hopeless problem of survival, on the exigencies of space navigation; but it is all useless. Ever I am aware of those stiff and swollen bodies, swimming in the awful silence of the void, with the white, airless sun like a leprosy of light on their upturned faces.

I try to keep my eyes on the control-board — on the astronomic charts — on the log I am writing — on the stars toward which I am travelling. But a frightful and irresistible magnetism makes me turn at intervals, and mechanically, helplessly, to the rearward ports. There are no words for what I feel and think — and words are as lost things along with the worlds I have left so far behind. I sink in a chaos of vertiginous horror, beyond all possibility of return.

* * *

Sept. 18th. I am entering the zone of the asteroids — those desert rocks, fragmentary and amorphous, that whirl in far-scattered array between Mars and Jupiter. Today the *Selenite* passed very close to one of them — a small body like a broken-off mountain, which heaved suddenly from the gulf with knife-sharp pinnacles and black gullies that seemed to cleave to its very heart.

The *Selenite* would have crashed full upon it in a few instants, if I had not reversed the power and steered in an abrupt diagonal to the right. As it was, I passed near enough for the bodies of Colt and Gershom to be caught by the gravitational pull of the planetoid; and when I looked back at the receding rock, after the vessel was out of danger, they had disappeared from sight. Finally I located them with the telescopic reflector, and saw that they were revolving in space, like infinitesimal moons, about that awful, naked

asteroid. Perhaps they will float thus forever, or will drift gradually down in lessening circles, to find a tomb in one of those bleak, bottomless ravines.

* * *

Sept. 16th I have passed several more of the asteroids — irregular fragments, little larger than meteoric stones; and all my skill of spacemanship has been taxed severely to avert collision. Because of the need for unrelaxing vigilance, I have been compelled to keep awake at all times. But sooner or later, sleep will overpower me, and the *Selenite* will crash to destruction.

After all, it matters little: the end is inevitable, and must come soon enough in any case. The store of concentrated food, the tanks of compressed oxygen, might keep me alive for many months, since there is no one but myself to consume them. But the fuel is almost gone, as I know from my former calculations. At any moment, the propulsion may cease. Then the vessel will drift idly and helplessly in this cosmic limbo, and be drawn to its doom on some asteroidal reef.

* * *

Sept. 21st. Everything I have expected has happened, and yet by some miracle of chance — or mischance — I am still alive.

The fuel gave out yesterday (at least I think it was yesterday). But I was too close to the nadir of physical and mental exhaustion to realize clearly that the rocket-explosions had ceased. I was dead for want of sleep, and had gotten into a state beyond hope or despair. Dimly I remember setting the vessel's controls through automatic force of habit; and then I lashed myself in my hammock and fell asleep instantly.

I have no means of guessing how long I slept. Vaguely, in the gulf beyond dreams, I heard a crash as of far-off thunder, and felt a violent vibration that jarred me into dull wakefulness. A sensation of unnatural, sweltering heat began to oppress me as I struggled toward consciousness; but when I had opened my heavy eyes, I was unable to determine for some little time what had really happened.

Twisting my head so that I could peer out through one of the ports, I was startled to see, on a purple-black sky, an icy, glittering horizon of saw-edged rocks.

For an instant, I thought that the vessel was about to strike on some looming planetoid. Then, overwhelmingly, I realized that *the crash had already occurred* — that I had been awakened from my coma-like slumber by the falling of the *Selenite* upon one of those cosmic islets.

I was wide-awake now, and I hastened to unlash myself from the hammock. I found that the floor was pitched sharply, as if the vessel had landed on a slope or had buried its nose in the alien terrain. Feeling a queer, disconcerting lightness, and barely able to re-establish my feet on the floor, I gradually made my way to the nearest port. It was plain that the artificial gravity-system of the flier had been thrown out of commission by the crash, and that I was now subject only to the feeble gravitation of the asteroid. It seemed to me that I was light and incorporeal as a cloud — that I was no more than the airy specter of my former self.

The floor and walls were strangely hot; and it came to me that the heating must have been caused by the passage of the *Selenite* through some sort of atmosphere. The asteroid, then, was not wholly airless, as such bodies are commonly supposed to be; and probably it was one of the larger fragments with a diameter of many miles — perhaps hundreds. But even

this realization failed to prepare me for the weird and surprising scene upon which I gazed through the port.

The horizon of serrate peaks, like a miniature mountain-range, lay at a distance of several hundred yards. Above it, the small, intensely brilliant sun, like a fiery moon in its magnitude, was sinking with visible rapidity in the dark sky that revealed the major stars and planets.

The *Selenite* had plunged into a shallow valley, and had half-buried its prow and bottom in a soil that was formed by decomposing rock, mainly basaltic. All about were fretted ridges, guttering pillars and pinnacles; and over these, amazingly, there clambered frail, pipy, leafless vines with broad, yellow-green tendrils flat and thin as paper. Insubstantial-looking lichens, taller than a man, and having the form of flat antlers, grew in single rows and thickets along the valley.

Between the thickets, I saw the approach of certain living creatures who rose from behind the middle rocks with the suddenness and lightness of leaping insects. They seemed to skim the ground with long, flying steps that were both easy and abrupt.

There were five of these beings, who, no doubt, had been attracted by the fall of the *Selenite* from space and were coming to inspect it. In a few moments, they neared the vessel and paused before it with the same effortless ease that had marked all their movements.

What they really were, I do not know; but for want of other analogies, I must liken them to insects. Standing perfectly erect, they towered seven feet in air. Their eyes, like faceted opals, at the end of curving protractile stalks, rose level with the port. Their unbelievably thin limbs, their stem-like bodies, comparable to those of the *phasmidae*, or “walking-sticks”, were covered with gray-green shards. Their heads, triangular in shape, were

flanked with immense, perforated membranes, and were fitted with mandibular mouths that seemed to grin eternally.

I think that they saw me with those weird, inexpressive eyes; for they drew nearer, pressing against the very port, till I could have touched them with my hand if the port had been open. Perhaps they too were surprised: for the thin eye-stalks seemed to lengthen as they stared and there was a queer waving of their sharded arms, a quivering of their horny mouths, as if they were holding converse with each other. After a while they went away, vanishing swiftly beyond the near horizon.

Since then, I have examined the *Selenite* as fully as possible, to ascertain the extent of the damage. I think that the outer hull has been crumpled or even fused in places: for when I approached the manhole, clad in a space suit, with the idea of emerging, I found that I could not open the lid. My exit from the flier has been rendered impossible, since I have no tools with which to cut the heavy metal or shatter the tough, neo-crystal ports. I am sealed in the *Selenite* as in a prison; and the prison, in due time, must also become my tomb.

Later. I shall no longer try to date this record. It is impossible under the circumstances, to retain even an approximate sense of earthly time. The chronometers have ceased running, and their machinery has been hopelessly jarred by the vessel's fall. The diurnal periods of this planetoid are, it would seem, no more than an hour or two in duration; and the nights are equally short. Darkness swept upon the landscape like a black wing after I had finished writing my last entry; and since then, so many of these ephemeral days and nights have shuttled by, that I have now ceased to count them. My very sense of duration is becoming oddly confused. Now that I have grown somewhat used to my situation, the brief days drag with immeasurable tedium.

The beings whom I call the walking-sticks have returned to the vessel, coming daily, and bringing scores and hundreds of others. It would seem that they correspond in some measure to humanity, being the dominant life-form of this little world. In most ways, they are incomprehensibly alien; but certain of their actions bear a remote kinship to those of men, and suggest similar impulses and instincts.

Evidently they are curious. They crowd around the *Selenite* in great numbers, inspecting it with their stalk-borne eyes, touching the hull and ports with their attenuated members. I believe they are trying to establish some sort of communication with me. I cannot be sure that they emit vocal sounds, since the hull of the flier is soundproof; but I am sure that the stiff, semaphoric gestures which they repeat in a certain order before the port as soon as they catch sight of me, are fraught with conscious and definite meaning.

Also, I surmise an actual veneration in their attitude, such as would be accorded by savages to some mysterious visitant from the heavens. Each day, when they gather before the ship, they bring curious spongy fruits and porous vegetable forms which they leave like a sacrificial offering on the ground. By their gestures, they seem to implore me to accept these offerings.

Oddly enough, the fruits and vegetables always disappear during the night. They are eaten by large, luminous, flying creatures with filmy wings, that seem to be wholly nocturnal in their habits. Doubtless, however, the walking-sticks believe that I, the strange ultra-stellar god, have accepted the sacrifice.

It is all strange, unreal, immaterial. The loss of normal gravity makes me feel like a phantom; and I seem to live in a phantom world. My thoughts, my memories, my despair — all are no more than mists that waver on the

verge of oblivion... And yet, by some fantastic irony, I am worshipped as a god!

* * *

Innumerable days have gone by since I made the last entry in this log. The seasons of the asteroid have changed: the days have grown briefer, the nights longer; and a bleak wintriness pervades the valley. The frail, flat vines are withering on the rocks, and the tall lichen-thickets have assumed funereal autumn hues of madder and mauve. The sun revolves in a low arc above the sawtoothed horizon, and its orb is small and pale as if it were receding into the black gulf among the stars.

The people of the asteroid appear less often, they seem fewer in number, and their sacrificial gifts are rare and scant. No longer do they bring sponge-like fruits, but only pale and porous fungi that seem to have been gathered in caverns.

They move slowly, as if the winter cold were beginning to numb them. Yesterday, three of them fell, after depositing their gifts, and lay still before the flier. They have not moved, and I feel sure that they are dead. The luminous night-flying creatures have ceased to come, and the sacrifices remain undisturbed beside their bearers.

* * *

The awfulness of my fate has closed upon me today. No more of the walking-sticks have appeared. I think that they have all died — the ephemerae of this tiny world that is bearing me with it into the Arctic limbo of the solar system. Doubtless their lifetime corresponds only to its summer — to its perihelion.

Thin clouds have gathered in the dark air, and snow is falling like fine powder. I feel an unspeakable desolation — a dreariness that I cannot write. The heating-apparatus of the *Selenite* is still in good working-order; so the cold cannot reach me. But the black frost of space has fallen upon my spirit. Strange — I did not feel so utterly bereft and alone while the insect people came daily. Now that they come no more, I seem to have been overtaken by the ultimate horror of solitude, by the chill terror of an alienation beyond life. I can write no longer, for my brain and my heart fail me.

* * *

Still, it would seem, I live after an eternity of darkness and madness in the flier, of death and winter in the world outside. During that time, I have not written in the log; and I know not what obscure impulse prompts me to resume a practice so irrational and futile.

I think it is the sun, passing in a higher and longer arc above the dead landscape, that has called me back from the utterness of despair. The snow has melted from the rocks, forming little rills and pools of water; and strange plant-buds are protruding from the sandy soil. They lift and swell visibly as I watch them. I am beyond hope, beyond life, in a weird vacuum; but I see these beings as a condemned captive sees the stirring of spring from his cell. They rouse in me an emotion whose very name I had forgotten.

My food-supply is getting low, and the reserve of compressed air is even lower. I am afraid to calculate how much longer it will last. I have tried to break the neo-crystal ports with a large monkey-wrench for hammer; but the blows, owing partly to my own weightlessness, are futile as the tapping of a feather. Anyway, in all likelihood, the outside air would be too thin for human respiration.

The walking-stick people have reappeared before the flier. I feel sure, from their lesser height, their brighter coloring, and the immature development of certain members, that they all represent a new generation. None of my former visitors have survived the winter; but somehow the new ones seem to regard the *Selenite* and me with the same curiosity and reverence that were shown by their elders. They, too, have begun to bring gifts of unsubstantial-looking fruit; and they strew filmy blossoms below the port. I wonder how they propagate themselves, and how knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another...

* * *

The flat, lichenous vines are mounting on the rocks, are clambering over the hull of the *Selenite*. The young walking-sticks gather daily to worship — they make those enigmatic signs which I have never understood, and they move in swift gyrations about the vessel, as in the measures of a hieratic dance. I, the lost and doomed, have been the god of two generations. Perhaps they will still worship me when I am dead. I think the air is almost gone — I am more light-headed than usual today, and there is a queer constriction in my throat and chest...

* * *

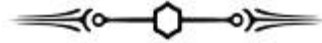
Perhaps I am a little delirious, and have begun to imagine things; but I have just perceived an odd phenomenon, hitherto unnoted. I don't know what it is. A thin, columnar mist, moving and writhing like a serpent, with opal colors that change momentarily, has disappeared among the rocks and is approaching the vessel. It seems like a live thing — like a vaporous entity; and somehow, it is poisonous and inimical. It glides forward, rearing above the throng of *phasmidae*, who have all prostrated themselves as if in fear. I

see it more clearly now: it is half-transparent, with a web of gray threads among its changing colors; and it is putting forth a long, wavering tentacle.

It is some rare life-form, unknown to earthly science; and I cannot even surmise its nature and attributes. Perhaps it is the only one of its kind on the asteroid. No doubt it has just discovered the presence of the *Selenite*, and has been drawn by curiosity, like the walking-stick people.

The tentacle has touched the hull — it has reached the port behind which I stand, pencilling these words. The gray threads in the tentacle glow as if with sudden fire. My God — it is coming *through the neo-crystal lens*

Morthylla



IN UMBRI, CITY of the Delta, the lights blazed with a garish brilliance after the setting of that sun which was now a coal-red decadent star, grown old beyond chronicle, beyond legend. Most brilliant, most garish of all were the lights that illumed the house of the ageing poet Famurza, whose Anacreontic songs had brought him the riches that he disbursed in orgies for his friends and sycophants. Here, in porticoes, halls and chambers the cressets were thick as stars in a cloudless fault. It seemed that Famurza wished to dissipate all shadows, except those in arrased alcoves set apart for the fitful amours of his guests.

For the kindling of such amours there were wines, cordials, aphrodisiacs. There were meats and fruits that swelled the flaccid pulses. There were strange exotic drugs that amused and prolonged pleasure. There were curious statuettes in half-veiled niches; and wall panels painted with bestial loves, or loves human or superhuman. There were hired singers of all sexes, who sang ditties diversely erotic; and dancers whose contortions were calculated to restore the outworn sense when all else had failed.

But to all such incitants Valzain, pupil of Famurza, and renowned both as poet and voluptuary, was insensible.

With indifference turning toward disgust, a half-emptied cup in his hand, he watched from a corner the gala throng that eddied past him, and averted his eyes involuntarily from certain couples who were too shameless or drunken to seek the shadows of privacy for their dalliance. A sudden satiety had claimed him. He felt himself strangely withdrawn from the morass of

wine and flesh into which, not long before, he had still plunged with delight. He seemed as one who stands on an alien shore, beyond waters of deepening separation.

“What ails you, Valzain? Has a vampire sucked your blood?” It was Famurza, flushed, gray-haired, slightly corpulent, who stood at his elbow. Laying an affectionate hand on Valzain’s shoulder, he hoisted aloft with the other that fescenninely graven quart goblet from which he was wont to drink only wine, eschewing the drugged and violent liquors often preferred by the sybarites of Umbri

“Is it billiousness? Or unrequited love? We have cures here for both. You have only to name your medicine”

“There is no medicine for what ails me,” countered Valzain. “As for love, I have ceased to care whether it be requited or unrequited. I can taste only the dregs in every cup. And tedium lurks at the middle of all kisses”

“Truly, yours is a melancholy case.” There was concern in Famurza’s voice. “I have been reading some of your late verses. You write only of tombs and yew trees, of maggots and phantoms and disembodied love. Such stuff gives me the colic, I need at least a half-gallon of honest vine juice after each poem.”

“Though I did not know it till lately,” admitted Valzain, “there is in me a curiosity toward the unseen, a longing for things beyond the material world.”

Famurza shook his head commiserately. “Though I have attained to more than twice your years, I am still content with what I see and hear and touch. Good juicy meat, women, wine, the songs of full-throated singers, are enough for me.”

“In the drums of slumber,” mused Valzain. “I have clasped succubi who were more than flesh, have known delights too keen for the waking body to

sustain. Do such dreams have any source, outside the earthborn brain itself? I would give much to find that source, if it exists. In the meanwhile there is nothing for me but despair.”

“So young — and yet so exhausted! Well, if you’re tired of women, and want phantoms instead, I might venture a suggestion. Do you know the old necropolis, lying midway between Umbri and Psiom — a matter of perhaps three miles from here? The goatherds say that a lamia haunts it — the spirit of the princess Morthylla, who died several centuries ago and was interred in a mausoleum that still stands, overtopping the lesser tombs. Why not go forth tonight and visit the necropolis? It should suit your mood better than my house. And perhaps Morthylla will appear to you. But don’t blame me if you don’t return at all. After all those years the lamia is still avid for human lovers; and she might well take a fancy to you.”

“Of course, I know the place,” said Valzain... “But I think you are jesting.”

Famurza shrugged his shoulders and moved on amid the revelers. A laughing dancer, blonde-limbed and lissom, came up to Valzain and threw a noose of plaited flowers about his neck, claiming him as her captive. He broke the noose gently, and gave the girl a tepid kiss that caused her to make wry faces. Unobtrusively but quickly, before others of the merrymakers could try to entice him, he left the house of Famurza.

Without impulses, other than that of an urgent desire for solitude, he turned his steps toward the suburbs, avoiding the neighborhood of taverns and lupanars, where the populace thronged. Music, laughter, snatches of songs, followed him from lighted mansions where symposia were held nightly by the city’s richer denizens. But he met few roisters on the streets: it was too late for the gathering, too early for the dispersal, of guests at such symposia.

Now the lights thinned out, with ever-widening intervals between, and the streets grew shadowy with that ancient night which pressed about Umbri, and would wholly quench its defiant galaxies of lamp-bright window with the darkening of Zothique's senescent sun. Of such things, and of death's encircling mystery, were the musings of Valzain as he plunged into the outer darkness that he found grateful to his glare-wearied eyes.

Grateful too was the silence of the field-bordered road that he pursued for awhile without realizing its direction. Then, at some landmark familiar despite the gloom, it came to him that the road was the one which ran from Umbri to Psiom, that sister city of the Delta; the road beside whose middle meanderings was situated the long-disused necropolis to which Famurza had ironically directed him.

Truly, he thought, the earthly-minded Famurza had somehow plumbed the need that lay at the bottom of his disenchantment with all sensory pleasures. It would be good to visit, to sojourn for an hour or so, in that city whose people had long passed beyond the lusts of mortality, beyond satiety and disillusion.

A moon, swelling from the crescent toward the half, arose behind him as he reached the foot of the lowmounded hill on which the cemetery lay. He left the paved road, and began to ascend the slope, half-covered with stunted gorse, at whose summit the glimmering marbles were discernible. It was without path, other than the broken trails made by goats and their herders. Dim, lengthened and attenuate, his shadow went before him, like a ghostly guide. In his fantasy it seemed to him that he climbed the gently sloping bosom of a giantess, studded afar with pale gems that were tombstones and mausoleums. He caught himself wondering, amid this poetic whimsy, whether the giantess was dead, or merely slept.

Gaining the flat expansive ground of the summit, where dwarfish dying yews disputed with leafless briars the intervals of slabs blotched with lichen, he recalled the tale that Famurza had mentioned, anent the lamia who was said to haunt the necropolis. Famurza, he knew well, was no believer in such legendry, and had meant only to mock his funereal mood. Yet, as a poet will, he began to play with the fancy of some presence, immortal, lovely and evil, that dwelt amid the antique marbles and would respond to the evocation of one who, without positive belief, had longed vainly for visions from beyond mortality.

Through headstone aisles of moon-touched solitude, he came to a lofty mausoleum, still standing with few signs of ruin at the cemetery's center. Beneath it, he had been told, were extensive vaults housing the mummies of an extinct royal family that had ruled over the twin cities Umbri and Psiom in former centuries. The princess Morthylla had belonged to this family.

To his startlement a woman, or what appeared to be such, was sitting on a fallen shaft beside the mausoleum. He could not see her distinctly; the tomb's shadow still enveloped her from the shoulders downward. The face alone, glimmering wanly, was lifted to the rising moon. Its profile was such as he had seen on antique coins.

"Who are you?" he asked, with a curiosity that overpowered his courtesy.

"I am the lamia Morthylla," she replied, in a voice that left behind it a faint and elusive vibration like that of some briefly sounded harp. "Beware me — for my kisses are forbidden to those who would remain numbered among the living."

Valzain was startled by this answer that echoed his fantasies. Yet reason told him that the apparition was no spirit of the tombs but a living woman who knew the legend of Morthylla and wished to amuse herself by teasing

him. And yet what woman would venture alone and at night to a place so desolate and eerie?

Most credibly, she was a wanton who had come out to keep a rendezvous amid the tombs. There were, he knew, certain perverse debauchees who required sepulchral surroundings and furnishings for the titillation of their desires.

“Perhaps you are waiting for some one,” he suggested. “I do not wish to intrude, if such is the case.”

“I wait only for him who is destined to come. And I have waited long, having had no lover for two hundred years. Remain, if you wish: there is no one to fear but me.”

Despite the rational surmises he had formed, there crept along Valzain’s spine the thrill of one who, without fully believing, suspects the presence of a thing beyond nature... Yet surely it was all a game — a game that he too could play for the beguilement of his ennui.

“I came here hoping to meet you,” he declared.. “I am weary of mortal women, tired of every pleasure — tired even of poetry.”

“I, too, am bored,” she said, simply.

The moon had climbed higher, shining on the dress of antique mode that the woman wore. It was cut closely at waist and hips and bosom, with voluminous downward folds. Valzain had seen such costumes only in old drawings. The princess Morthylla, dead for three centuries, might well have worn a similar dress.

Whoever she might be, he thought, the woman was strangely beautiful, with a touch of quaintness in the heavily coiled hair whose color he could not decide in the moonlight. There was a sweetness about her mouth, a shadow of fatigue, or sadness beneath her eyes. At the right corner of her lips he discerned a small mole.

Valzain's meeting with the self-named Morthylla was repeated nightly while the moon swelled like the rounding breast of a titaness and fell away once more to hollowness and senescence. Always she awaited him by the same mausoleum which, she declared, was her dwelling place. And always she dismissed him when the east turned ashen with dawn, saying that she was a creature of the night.

Skeptical at first, he thought of her as a person with macabre leanings and fantasies akin to his own, with whom he was carrying on a flirtation of singular charm. Yet about her he could find no hint of the worldliness that he suspected: no seeming knowledge of present things, but a weird familiarity with the past and the lamia's legend. More and more she seemed a nocturnal being, intimate only with shadow and solitude.

Her eyes, her lips, appeared to withhold secrets forgotten and forbidden. In her vague, ambiguous answers to his questions, he read meanings that thrilled him with hope and fear.

"I have dreamed of life," she told him cryptically. "And I have dreamed also of death. Now, perhaps there is another dream — into which you have entered."

"I, too, would dream," said Valzain.

Night after night his disgust and weariness sloughed away from him, in a fascination fed by the spectral milieu, the envioning silence of the dead, his withdrawal and separation from the carnal, garish city. By degrees, by alternations of unbelief and belief, he came to accept her as the actual lamia. The hunger that he sensed in her, could be only the lamia's hunger; her beauty that of a being no longer human. It was like a dreamer's acceptance of things fantastic elsewhere than in sleep.

Together with his belief, there grew his love for her. The desires he had thought dead revived within him, wilder, more importunate.

She seemed to love him in return. Yet she betrayed no sign of the lamia's legendary nature, eluding his embrace, refusing him the kisses for which he begged.

"Sometime, perhaps," she conceded. "But first you must know me for what I am, must love me without illusion."

"Kill me with your lips, devour me as you are said to have devoured other lovers," beseeched Valzain.

"Can you not wait?" her smile was sweet — and tantalizing. "I do not wish your death so soon, for I love you too well. Is it not sweet to keep your tryst among the sepulchres? Have I not beguiled you from your boredom? Must you end it all?"

The next night he besought her again, imploring with all his ardor and eloquence the denied consummation.

She mocked him: "Perhaps I am merely a bodiless phantom, a spirit without substance. Perhaps you have dreamed me. Would you risk an awakening from the dream?"

Valzain stepped toward her, stretching out his arms in a passionate gesture. She drew back, saying:

"What if I should turn to ashes and moonlight at your touch? You would regret then your rash insistence."

"You are the immortal lamia," avowed Valzain. "My senses tell me that you are no phantom, no disembodied spirit. But for me you have turned all else to shadow."

"Yes, I am real enough in my fashion," she granted, laughing softly. Then suddenly she leaned toward him and her lips touched his throat. He felt their moist warmth a moment — and felt the sharp sting of her teeth that barely pierced his skin, withdrawing instantly. Before he could clasp her she eluded him again.

“It is the only kiss permitted to us at present,” she cried, and fled swiftly with soundless footfalls among the gleams and shadows of the sepulchres.

On the following afternoon a matter of urgent and unwelcome business called Valzain to the neighboring city of Psiom: a brief journey, but one that he seldom took.

He passed the ancient necropolis, longing for that nocturnal hour when he could hasten once more to a meeting with Morthylla. Her poignant kiss, which had drawn a few drops of blood, had left him greatly fevered and distraught. He, like that place of tombs, was haunted; and the haunting went with him into Psiom.

He had finished his business, the borrowing of a sum of money from a usurer. Standing at the usurer’s door, with that slightly obnoxious but necessary person beside him, he saw a woman passing on the street.

Her features, though not her dress, were those of Morthylla; and there was even the same tiny mole at one corner of her mouth. No phantom of the cemetery could have startled or dismayed him more profoundly.

“Who is that woman? he asked the moneylender. “Do you know her?”

“Her name is Beldith. She is well-known in Psiom, being rich in her own right and having had numerous lovers. I’ve had a little business with her, though she owes me nothing at present. Should you care to meet her? I can easily introduce you.”

“Yes, I should like to meet her,” agreed Valzain. “She looks strangely like someone that I knew a long time ago.

The usurer peered slyly at the poet. “She might not make too easy a conquest. It is said of late that she has withdrawn herself from the pleasures of the city. Some have seen her going out at night toward the old necropolis, or returning from it in the early dawn. Strange tastes, I’d say, for one who is

little more than a harlot. But perhaps she goes out to meet some eccentric lover.”

“Direct me to her house,” Valzain requested. “I shall not need you to introduce me.”

“As you like.” The moneylender shrugged, looking a little disappointed. “It’s not far, anyway.”

Valzain found the house quickly. The woman Beldith was alone. She met him with a wistful and troubled smile that left no doubt of her identity.

“I perceive that you have learned the truth,” she said “I had meant to tell you soon, for the deception could not have gone on much longer. Will you not forgive me?”

“I forgive you,” returned Valzain sadly. “But why did you deceive me?”

“Because you desired it. A woman tries to please the man whom she loves; and in all love there is more or less deception.

“Like you, Valzain, I had grown tired of pleasure. And I sought the solitude of the necropolis, so remote from carnal things. You too came, seeking solitude and peace — or some unearthly specter. I recognized you at once. And I had read your poems. Knowing Morthylla’s legend, I sought to play a game with you. Playing it, I grew to love you... Valzain, you loved me as the lamia. Can you not now love me for myself?”

“It cannot be,” averred the poet. “I fear to repeat the disappointment I have found in other women. Yet at least I am grateful for the hours you gave me. They were the best I have known — even though I have loved something that did not, and could not, exist. Farewell, Morthylla. Farewell, Beldith.”

When he had gone, Beldith stretched herself face downward among the cushions of her couch. She wept a little; and the tears made a dampness that

quickly dried. Later she arose briskly enough and went about her household business.

‘After a time she returned to the loves and revelries of Psiom. Perhaps, in the end, she found such peace as may be given to those who have grown too old for pleasure.

But for Valzain there was no peace, no balm for this last and most bitter of disillusionments. Nor could he return to the carnalities of his former life. So it was that he finally slew himself, stabbing his throat to its deepest vein with a keen knife in the same spot which the false lamia’s teeth had bitten, drawing a little blood.

After his death, he forgot that he had died; forgot the immediate past with all its happenings and circumstances.

Following his talk with Famurza, he had gone forth from Famurza’s house and from the city of Umbri and had taken the road that passed the abandoned cemetery. Seized by an impulse to visit it, he had climbed the slope toward the marbles under a swelling moon that rose behind him.

Gaining the flat expansive ground of the summit, where dwarfish dying yews disputed with leafless briars the intervals of slabs blotched with lichen, he recalled the tale that Famurza had mentioned, anent the lamia who was said to haunt the necropolis. Famurza, he knew well, was no believer in such legendry, and had meant only to mock his funereal mood. Yet, as a poet will, he began to play with the fancy of some presence, immortal, lovely and evil, that dwelt amid the antique marbles and would respond to the evocation of one who, without positive belief, had longed vainly for visions from beyond mortality.

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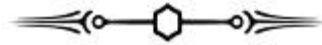
an extinct royal family that had ruled over the twin cities Umbri and Psiom in former centuries. The princess Morthylla had belonged to this family.

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Mother of Toads



“WHY MUST YOU always hurry away, my little one?”

The voice of Mère Antoinette, the witch, was an amorous croaking. She ogled Pierre, the apothecary’s young apprentice, with eyes full-orbed and unblinking as those of a toad. The folds beneath her chin swelled like the throat of some great batrachian. Her short flat fingers, outspread on her soiled apron, revealed an appearance as of narrow webs between their first flanges.

Pierre Baudin, as usual, gave no answer but turned his eyes from Mère Antoinette with an air of impatience. Her voice, raucously coaxing, persisted:

“Stay awhile tonight, my pretty orphan. No one will miss you in the village. And your master will not mind.”

Pierre tossed his head with the disdain of a young Adonis. The witch was more than twice his age, and her charms were too uncouth and unsavory to tempt him for an instant. She was repellently fat and lumpish, and her skin possessed an unwholesome pallor. Also, her reputation was such as to have nullified the attractions of a younger and fairer sorceress. Her witchcraft had made her feared among the peasantry of that remote province, where belief in spells and philtres was still common. The people of Averroigne called her *La Mère des Crapauds*, Mother of Toads, a name given for more than one reason. Toads swarmed innumerable about her hut; they were said to be her familiars, and dark tales were told concerning their relationship to the sorceress, and the duties they performed at her bidding. Such tales were

all the more readily believed because of those batrachian features that had always been remarked in her aspect.

The youth disliked her, even as he disliked the sluggish, abnormally large toads on which he had sometimes trodden in the dusk, upon the path between her hut and the village of Les Hiboux. He could hear some of these creatures croaking now; and it seemed, weirdly, that they uttered half-articulate echoes of the witch's words.

It would be dark soon, he reflected. The path along the marshes was not pleasant by night, and he felt doubly anxious to depart. Still without replying to Mère Antoinette's invitation, he reached for the black triangular vial she had set before him on her greasy table. The vial contained a philtre of curious potency which his master, Alain le Dindon, had sent him to procure. Le Dindon, the village apothecary, was wont to deal surreptitiously in certain dubious medicaments supplied by the witch; and Pierre had often gone on such errands to her osier-hidden hut.

The old apothecary, whose humor was rough and ribald, had sometimes rallied Pierre concerning Mère Antoinette's preference for him. Remembering certain admonitory gibes, more witty than decent, the boy flushed angrily as he turned to go.

"Stay," insisted Mère Antoinette. "The fog is cold on the marshes; and it thickens apace. I knew that you were coming, and I have mulled for you a goodly measure of the red wine of Ximes."

She removed the lid from an earthen pitcher and poured its steaming contents into a large cup. The purplish-red wine creamed delectably, and an odor of hot, delicious spices filled the hut, overpowering the less agreeable odors from the simmering cauldron, the half-dried newts, vipers, bat-wings and evil, nauseous herbs hanging on the walls, and the reek of the black

candles of pitch and corpse-tallow that burned always, by noon or night, in that murky interior.

“I’ll drink it,” said Pierre, a little grudgingly; “that is, if it contains nothing of your own concoction.”

“’Tis naught but sound wine, four seasons old, with spices of Arabia,” the sorceress croaked ingratiatingly. “’Twill warm your stomach ... and ...” she added something inaudible as Pierre accepted the cup.

Before drinking, he inhaled the fumes of the beverage with some caution but was reassured by its pleasant smell. Surely it was innocent of any drug, any philtre brewed by the witch: for, to his knowledge, her preparations were all evil-smelling.

Still, as if warned by some premonition, he hesitated. Then he remembered that the sunset air was indeed chill; that mists had gathered furtively behind him as he came to Mère Antoinette’s dwelling. The wine would fortify him for the dismal return walk to Les Hiboux. He quaffed it quickly and set down the cup.

“Truly, it is good wine,” he declared. “But I must go now.”

Even as he spoke, he felt in his stomach and veins the spreading warmth of the alcohol, of the spices ... of something more ardent than these. It seemed that his voice was unreal and strange, falling as if from a height above him. The warmth grew, mounting within him like a golden flame fed by magic oils. His blood, a seething torrent, poured tumultuously and more tumultuously through his members.

There was a deep soft thundering in his ears, a rosy dazzlement in his eyes. Somehow the hut appeared to expand, to change luminously about him. He hardly recognized its squalid furnishings, its litter of baleful oddments, on which a torrid splendor was shed by the black candles, tipped

with ruddy fire, that towered and swelled gigantically into the soft gloom. His blood burned as with the throbbing flame of the candles.

It came to him, for an instant, that all this was a questionable enchantment, a glamor wrought by the witch's wine. Fear was upon him and he wished to flee. Then, close beside him, he saw Mère Antoinette.

Briefly he wondered why he had thought her old and gross and repulsive: for it seemed that he looked upon Lilith, the first witch... The lumpish limbs and body had grown voluptuous; the pale, thick-lipped mouth enticed him with a promise of ampler kisses than other mouths could yield. He knew why the magic warmth mounted ever higher and hotter within him...

"Do you like me now, my little one?" she questioned...

Pierre awoke in the ashy dawn, when the tall black tapers had dwindled down and had melted limply in their sockets. Sick and confused, he sought vainly to remember where he was or what he had done. Then, turning a little, he saw beside him on the couch a thing that was like some impossible monster of ill dreams: a toad-like form, large as a fat woman. Its limbs were somehow like a woman's arms and legs. Its pale, warty body pressed and bulged against him, and he felt the rounded softness of something that resembled a breast.

Nausea rose within him as memory of that delirious night returned. Most foully he had been beguiled by the witch, and had succumbed to her evil enchantments.

It seemed that an incubus smothered him, weighing upon all his limbs and body. He shut his eyes, that he might no longer behold the loathsome thing that was Mère Antoinette in her true semblance. Slowly, with prodigious effort, he drew himself away from the crushing nightmare shape. It did not stir or appear to waken; and he slid quickly from the couch.

Again, compelled by a noisome fascination, he peered at the thing on the couch — and saw only the gross form of Mère Antoinette. Perhaps his impression of a great toad beside him had been but an illusion, a half-dream that lingered after slumber. He lost something of his nightmarish horror; but his gorge still rose in a sick disgust, remembering the lewdness to which he had yielded.

Fearing that the witch might awaken at any moment and seek to detain him, he stole noiselessly from the hut. It was broad daylight, but a cold, hueless mist lay everywhere, shrouding the reedy marshes, and hanging like a ghostly curtain on the path he must follow to Les Hiboux. Moving and seething always, the mist seemed to reach toward him with intercepting fingers as he started homeward. He shivered at its touch, he bowed his head and drew his cloak closer around him.

Thicker and thicker the mist swirled, coiling, writhing endlessly, as if to bar Pierre's progress. He could discern the twisting, narrow path for only a few paces in advance. It was hard to find the familiar landmarks, hard to recognize the osiers and willows that loomed suddenly before him like gray phantoms and faded again into the white nothingness as he went onward. Never had he seen such fog: it was like the blinding, stifling fumes of a thousand witch-stirred cauldrons.

Though he was not altogether sure of his surroundings, Pierre thought that he had covered half the distance to the village. Then, all at once, he began to meet the toads. They were hidden by the mist till he came close upon them. Misshapen, unnaturally big and bloated, they squatted in his way on the little footpath or hopped sluggishly before him from the pallid gloom on either hand.

Several struck against his feet with a horrible and heavy flopping. He stepped unaware upon one of them, and slipped in the squashy noisomeness

it had made, barely saving himself from a headlong fall on the bog's rim. Black, miry water gloomed close beside him as he staggered there.

Turning to regain his path, he crushed others of the toads to an abhorrent pulp under his feet. The marshy soil was alive with them. They flopped against him from the mist, striking his legs, his bosom, his very face with their clammy bodies. They rose up by scores like a devil-driven legion. It seemed that there was a malignance, an evil purpose in their movements, in the buffeting of their violent impact. He could make no progress on the swarming path, but lurched to and fro, slipping blindly, and shielding his face with lifted hands. He felt an eery consternation, an eldritch horror. It was as if the nightmare of his awakening in the witch's hut had somehow returned upon him.

The toads came always from the direction of Les Hiboux, as if to drive him back toward Mère Antoinette's dwelling. They bounded against him like a monstrous hail, like missiles flung by unseen demons. The ground was covered by them, the air was filled with their hurtling bodies. Once, he nearly went down beneath them.

Their number seemed to increase, they pelted him in a noxious storm. He gave way before them, his courage broke, and he started to run at random, without knowing that he had left the safe path. Losing all thought of direction, in his frantic desire to escape from those impossible myriads, he plunged on amid the dim reeds and sedges, over ground that quivered gelatinously beneath him. Always at his heels he heard the soft, heavy flopping of the toads; and sometimes they rose up like a sudden wall to bar his way and turn him aside. More than once, they drove him back from the verge of hidden quagmires into which he would otherwise have fallen. It was as if they were herding him deliberately and concertedly to a destined goal.

Now, like the lifting of a dense curtain, the mist rolled away, and Pierre saw before him in a golden dazzle of morning sunshine the green, thick-growing osiers that surrounded Mère Antoinette's hut. The toads had all disappeared, though he could have sworn that hundreds of them were hopping close about him an instant previously. With a feeling of helpless fright and panic, he knew that he was still within the witch's toils; that the toads were indeed her familiars, as so many people believed them to be. They had prevented his escape, and had brought him back to the foul creature ... whether woman, batrachian, or both ... who was known as the Mother of Toads.

Pierre's sensations were those of one who sinks momentarily deeper into some black and bottomless quicksand. He saw the witch emerge from the hut and come toward him. Her thick fingers, with pale folds of skin between them like the beginnings of a web, were stretched and flattened on the steaming cup that she carried. A sudden gust of wind arose as if from nowhere, and bore to Pierre's nostrils the hot, familiar spices of the drugged wine.

"Why did you leave so hastily, my little one?" There was an amorous wheedling in the very tone of the witch's question. "I should not have let you go without another cup of the good red wine, mulled and spiced for the warming of your stomach... See, I have prepared it for you ... knowing that you would return."

She came very close to him as she spoke, leering and sidling, and held the cup toward his lips. Pierre grew dizzy with the strange fumes and turned his head away. It seemed that a paralyzing spell had seized his muscles, for the simple movement required an immense effort.

His mind, however, was still clear, and the sick revulsion of that nightmare dawn returned upon him. He saw again the great toad that had

lain at his side when he awakened.

“I will not drink your wine,” he said firmly. “You are a foul witch, and I loathe you. Let me go.”

“Why do you loathe me?” croaked Mère Antoinette. “I can give you all that other women give ... and more.”

“You are not a woman,” said Pierre. “You are a big toad. I saw you in your true shape this morning. I’d rather drown in the marsh-waters than stay with you again.”

An indescribable change came upon the sorceress before Pierre had finished speaking. The leer slid from her thick and pallid features, leaving them blankly inhuman for an instant. Then her eyes bulged and goggled horribly, and her whole body appeared to swell as if inflated with venom.

“Go, then!” she spat with a guttural virulence. “But you will soon wish that you had stayed.”

The queer paralysis had lifted from Pierre’s muscles. It was as if the injunction of the angry witch had served to revoke an insidious, half-woven spell. With no parting glance or word, Pierre turned from her and fled with long, hasty steps, almost running, on the path to Les Hiboux.

He had gone little more than a hundred paces when the fog began to return. It coiled shoreward in vast volumes from the marshes, it poured like smoke from the very ground at his feet. Almost instantly, the sun dimmed to a wan silver disk and disappeared. The blue heavens were lost in the pale and seething voidness overhead. The path before Pierre was blotted out till he seemed to walk on the sheer rim of a white abyss that moved with him as he went.

Like the clammy arms of specters, with death-chill fingers that clutched and caressed, the weird mists drew closer still about Pierre. They thickened in his nostrils and throat, they dripped in a heavy dew from his garments.

They choked him with the fetor of rank waters and putrescent ooze ... and a stench as of liquefying corpses that had risen somewhere to the surface amid the fen.

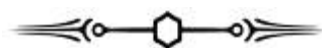
Then, from the blank whiteness, the toads assailed Pierre in a surging, solid wave that towered above his head and swept him from the dim path with the force of falling seas as it descended. He went down, splashing and floundering, into water that swarmed with the numberless batrachians. Foul slime was in his mouth and nose as he struggled to regain his footing. The water, however, was only knee-deep, and the bottom, though slippery and oozy, supported him with little yielding when he stood erect.

He discerned indistinctly through the mist the near-by margin from which he had fallen. But his steps were weirdly and horribly hampered by the toad-seething waters when he strove to reach it. Inch by inch, with a hopeless panic deepening upon him, he fought toward the solid shore. The toads leaped and tumbled about him with a dizzying eddy-like motion. They swirled like a viscid undertow around his feet and shins. They swept and swirled in great loathsome undulations against his retarded knees.

However, he made slow and painful progress, till his outstretched fingers could almost grasp the wiry sedges that trailed from the low bank. Then, from that mist-bound shore, there fell and broke upon him a second deluge of these demoniac toads; and Pierre was borne helplessly backward into the filthy waters.

Held down by the piling and crawling masses, and drowning in nauseous darkness at the thick-oozed bottom, he clawed feebly at his assailants. For a moment, ere oblivion came, his fingers found among them the outlines of a monstrous form that was somehow toad-like ... but large and heavy as a fat woman.

Murder in the Fourth Dimension



THE FOLLOWING PAGES are from a note-book that was discovered lying at the foot of an oak tree beside the Lincoln Highway, between Bowman and Auburn. They would have been dismissed immediately as the work of a disordered mind, if it had not been for the unaccountable disappearance, eight days before, of James Buckingham and Edgar Halpin. Experts testified that the hand-writing was undoubtedly that of Buckingham. A silver dollar, find a handkerchief marked with Buckingham's initials, were also round not far from the note-book.

* * *

Not everyone, perhaps, will believe that my ten years' hatred for Edgar Halpin was the impelling force that drove me to the perfecting of a most unique invention. Only those who have detested and loathed another man with the black fervor of the feeling I had conceived, will understand the patience with which I sought to devise a revenge that should be safe and adequate at the same time. The wrong he had done me was one that must be expiated sooner or later; and nothing short of his death would be sufficient. However, I did not care to hang, not even for a crime that I could regard as nothing more than the mere execution of justice; and, as a lawyer, I knew how difficult, how practically impossible, was the commission of a murder that would leave no betraying evidence. Therefore, I puzzled long and fruitlessly as to the manner in which Halpin should die, before my inspiration came to me.

I had reason enough to hate Edgar Halpin. We had been bosom friends all through our school days and through the first years of our professional life as law-partners. But when Halpin married the one woman I had ever loved with complete devotion, all friendship ceased on my side and was replaced by an ice-like barrier of inexorable enmity. Even the death of Alice, five years after the marriage, made no difference, for I could not forgive the happiness of which I had been deprived-the happiness they had shared during those years, like the thieves they were. I felt that she would have cared for me if it had not been for Halpin-indeed, she and I had been almost engaged before the beginning of his rivalry.

It must not be supposed, however, that I was indiscreet enough to betray my feelings at any time. Halpin was my daily associate in the Auburn law-firm to which we belonged; and I continued to be a most welcome and frequent guest at his home. I doubt if he ever knew that I had cared greatly for Alice: I am secretive and undemonstrative by temperament; and also, I am proud. No one, except Alice herself, ever surmised my suffering; and even she knew nothing of my resentment. Halpin himself trusted me; and nurturing as I did the idea of retaliation at some future time, I took care that he should continue to trust me. I made myself necessary to him in all ways, I helped him when my heart was a cauldron of seething poisons, I spoke words of brotherly affection and clapped him on the back when I would rather have driven a dagger through him. I knew all the tortures and all the nausea of a hypocrite. And day after day, year after year, I made my varying plans for an ultimate revenge.

Apart from my legal studies and duties, during those ten years, I apprised myself of everything available that dealt with the methods of murder. Crimes of passion allured me with a fateful interest, and I read untiringly the records, of particular cases. I made a study of weapons and poisons; and

as I studied them, I pictured to myself the death of Halpin in every conceivable way. I imagined the deed as being done at all hours of the day and night, in a multitude of places. The only flaw in these dreams was my inability to think of any spot that would assure perfect safety from subsequent detection.

It was my bent toward scientific speculation and experiment that finally gave me the clue I sought. I had long been familiar with the theory that other worlds or dimensions may co-exist in the same space with ours by reason of a different molecular structure and vibrational rate, rendering them intangible for us. One day, when I was indulging in a murderous fantasy, in which for the thousandth time I imagined myself throttling Halpin with my bare hands, it occurred to me that some unseen dimension, if one could only penetrate it, would be the ideal place for the commission of a homicide. All circumstantial evidence, as well as the corpse itself, would be lacking—in other words, one would have a perfect absence of what is known as the *corpus delicti*. The problem of how to obtain entrance to this dimension was of course an unsolved one; but I did not feel that it would necessarily prove insoluble. I set myself immediately to a consideration of the difficulties to be overcome, and the possible ways and means.

There are reasons why I do not care to set forth in this narrative the details of the various experiments to which I was drawn during the next three years. The theory that underlay my tests and researches was a very simple one; but the processes involved were highly intricate. In brief, the premise from which I worked was, that the vibratory rate of objects in the fourth dimension could be artificially established by means of some mechanism, and that things or persons exposed to the influence of the vibration could be transported thereby to this alien realm.

For a long time, all my experiments were condemned to failure, because I was groping among mysterious powers and recondite laws whose motive-principle I had not wholly grasped. I will not even hint at the basic nature of the device which brought about my ultimate success, for I do not want others to follow where I have gone and find themselves in the same dismal predicament. I will say, however, that the desired vibration was attained by condensing ultra-violet rays in a refractive apparatus made of certain very sensitive materials which I will not name.

The resultant power was stored in a kind of battery, and could be emitted from a vibratory disk suspended above an ordinary office chair, exposing everything beneath the disk to the influence of the new vibration. The range of the influence could be closely regulated by means of an insulating attachment. By the use of the apparatus, I finally succeeded in precipitating various articles into the fourth dimension: a dinner-plate, a bust of Dante, a Bible, a French novel and a house-cat, all disappeared from sight and touch in a few instants when the ultra-violet power was turned upon them. I knew that henceforth they were functioning as atomic entities in a world where all things had the same vibratory rate that had been artificially induced by means of my mechanism.

Before venturing into the invisible domain myself, it was of course necessary to have some way of returning. I invented a second battery and a second vibratory disk, through which, by the use of certain infra-red rays, the vibrations of our own world could be established. By turning the force from the disk on the very same spot where the dinner-plate and the other articles had disappeared, I succeeded in recovering all of them. All were absolutely unchanged; and though several months had gone by, the cat had not suffered in any way from its fourth-dimensional incarceration. The infra-red device was portable; and I meant to take it with me on my visit to

the new realm in company with Edgar Halpin. I-but not Halpin-would return anon to resume the threads of mundane existence.

My experiments had all been carried on with utter secrecy. To mask their real nature, as well as to provide myself with the needful privacy, I had built a small laboratory in the woods of an uncultivated ranch that I owned, lying midway between Auburn and Bowman. Here I retired at varying intervals when I had the requisite leisure, ostensibly to conduct some chemical experiments of an educative but far from unusual type. I never admitted anyone to the laboratory; and no great amount of curiosity was evinced by friends and acquaintances regarding its contents or the tests I was carrying on. Never did I breathe a syllable to anyone that could indicate the true goal of my researches.

I shall never forget the jubilation I felt when the infra-red device had proven its practicality by retrieving the plate, the bust, the two volumes and the cat. I was so eager for the consummation of my long-delayed revenge, that I did not even consider a preliminary personal trip into the fourth dimension. I had determined that Edgar Halpin must precede me when I went. I did not feel, however, that it would be wise to tell him anything concerning the real nature of my device, or the proposed excursion.

Halpin, at this time, was suffering from recurrent attacks of terrific neuralgia. One day, when he had complained more than usual, I told him under the seal of confidence that I had been working on a vibratory invention for the relief of such maladies and had finally perfected it.

“I’ll take you out to the laboratory to-night, and you can try it,” I said. “It will fix you up in a jiffy: all you’ll have to do will be to sit in a chair and let me turn on the current. But don’t say any thing to anybody.”

“Thanks, old man,” he rejoined. “Ill certainly be grateful if you can do anything to stop this damnable pain. It feels like electric drills boring

through my head all the time.”

I had chosen my time well, for all things were favorable to the maintenance of the secrecy I desired. Halpin lived on the outskirts of the town; and he was alone for the nonce, his housekeeper having gone away on a brief visit to some sick relative. The night was murky and foggy; and I drove to Halpin’s house and stopped for him shortly after the dinner hour, when few people were abroad. I do not think anyone saw us when we left the town. I followed a rough and little-used by-road for most of the way to my laboratory, saying that I did not care to meet other cars in the thick fog, if I could avoid it. We passed no one, and I felt that this was a good omen and that everything had combined to further my plan.

Halpin uttered an exclamation of surprise when I turned on the lights in my laboratory.

“I didn’t dream you had so much stuff here,” he remarked, peering about with respectful curiosity at the long array of unsuccessful appliances which I had thrown aside in the course of my labors.

I pointed to the chair above which the ultra-violet vibrator was suspended.

“Take a seat, Ed,” I enjoined him. “We’ll soon cure everything that ails you.

“Sure you aren’t going to electrocute me?” he joked, as he obeyed my direction.

A thrill of fierce triumph ran through me like the stimulation of some rare elixir, when he had seated himself. Everything was in my power now, and the moment of recompense for my ten years’ humiliation and suffering was at hand. Halpin was so unsuspecting: the thought of any danger to himself, of any treachery on my part, would have been fantastically

incredible to him. Putting my hand beneath my coat, I caressed the hilt of the hunting-knife that I carried.

“All set?” I asked him.

“Sure, Mike. Go ahead and shoot.”

I had found the exact range that would involve all of Halpin’s body without affecting the chair itself. Fixing my gaze upon him, I pressed the little knob that turned on the current of vibratory rays. The result was practically instantaneous, for he seemed to melt like a puff of thinning smoke. I could still see his outlines for a moment, and the look of a fantasmal astonishment on his face. And then he was gone-utterly gone.

Perhaps it will be a source of wonderment that, having annihilated Halpin as far as all earthly existence was concerned, I was not content merely to leave him in the unseen, intangible plane to which he had been transposed. Would that I had been content to do so. But the wrong I had suffered was hot and cankerous within me, and I could not bear to think that he still lived, in any form or upon any plane. Nothing but absolute death would suffice to assuage my resentment; and the death must be inflicted by my own hand. It now remained to follow Halpin into that realm which no man had ever visited before, and of whose geographical conditions and characteristics I had formed no idea whatever. I felt sure, however, that I could enter it and return safely, after disposing of my victim. The return of the cat left no apparent room for doubt on that score.

I turned out the lights; and seating myself in the chair with the portable infra-red vibrator in my arms, I switched on the ultra-violet power. The sensation I felt was that of one who falls with nightmare velocity into a great gulf. My ears were deaf with the intolerable thunder of my descent, a frightful sickness overcame me, and I was near to losing all consciousness

for a moment, in the black vortex of roaring space and force that seemed to draw me nadir-ward through the ultimate pits.

Then the speed of my fall was gradually retarded, and I came gently down to something that was solid beneath my feet. There was a dim glimmering of light that grew stronger as my eyes accustomed themselves to it, and by this light I saw Halpin standing a few feet away. Behind him were dark, amorphous rocks and the vague outlines of a desolate landscape of low mounds and primordial treeless flats. Even though I had hardly known what to expect, I was somewhat surprised by the character of the environment in which I found myself. At a guess, I would have said that the fourth dimension would be something more colourful and complex and varied-a land of multifold hues and many-angled forms. However, in its drear and primitive desolation, the place was truly ideal for the commission of the act I had intended.

Halpin came toward me in the doubtful light. There was a dazed and almost idiotic look on his face, and he stuttered a little as he tried to speak.

“W-What h-happened?” he articulated at last.

“Never mind what happened. It isn’t a circumstance to what’s going to happen now.

I laid the portable vibrator aside on the ground as I spoke.

The dazed look was still on Halpin’s face when I drew the hunting-knife and stabbed him through the body with one clean thrust. In that thrust, all the stifled hatred, all the cankering resentment of ten insufferable years was finally vindicated. He fell in a twisted heap, twitched a little, and lay still. The blood oozed very slowly from his side and formed a puddle. I remember wondering at its slowness, even then, for the oozing seemed to go on through hours and days.

Somehow, as I stood there, I was obsessed by a feeling of utter unreality. No doubt the long strain I had been under, the daily stress of indurate emotions and decade-deferred hopes, had left me unable to realize the final consummation of my desire when it came. The whole thing seemed no more than one of the homicidal day-dreams in which I had imagined myself stabbing Halpin to the heart and seeing his hateful body lie before me.

At length, I decided that it was time to effect my return; for surely nothing could be gained by lingering any longer beside Halpin's corpse amid the unutterable dreariness of the fourth-dimensional landscape. I erected the vibrator in a position where its rays could be turned upon myself, and pressed the switch.

I was aware of a sudden vertigo, and felt that I was about to begin another descent into fathomless vortical gulfs. But, though the vertigo persisted, nothing happened, and I found that I was still standing beside the corpse, in the same dismal milieu.

Dumbfoundment and growing consternation crept over me. Apparently, for some unknown reason, the vibrator would not work in the way I had so confidently expected. Perhaps, in these new surroundings, there was some barrier to the full development of the infra-red power. I do not know; but at any rate, there I was, in a truly singular and far from agreeable predicament.

I do not know how long I fooled in a mounting frenzy with the mechanism of the vibrator, in the hope that something had temporarily gone wrong and could be remedied, if the difficulty were only found. However, all my tinkering was of no avail: the machine was in perfect working-order, but the required force was wanting. I tried the experiment of exposing small articles to the influence of the rays. A silver coin and a handkerchief dissolved and disappeared very slowly, and I felt that they

must have regained the levels of mundane existence. But evidently the vibrational force was not strong enough to transport a human being.

Finally I gave it up and threw the vibrator to the ground. In the surge of a violent despair that came upon me, I felt the need of muscular action, of prolonged movement; and I started off at once to explore the weird realm in which I had involuntarily imprisoned myself.

It was an unearthly land-a land such as might have existed before the creation of life. There were undulating blanks of desolation beneath the uniform grey of a heaven without moon or sun or stars or clouds, from which an uncertain and diffused glimmering was cast upon the world beneath. There were no shadows, for the light seemed to emanate from all directions. The soil was a grey dust in places and a grey viscosity of slime in others; and the mounds I have already mentioned were like the backs of prehistoric monsters heaving from the primal ooze. There were no signs of insect or animal life, there were no trees, no herbs, and not even a blade of grass, a patch of moss or lichen, or a trace of algae. Many rocks were strewn chaotically through the desolation; and their forms were such as an idiotic demon might have devised in aping the handiwork of God. The light was so dim that all things were lost at a little distance; and I could not tell whether the horizon was near or far.

It seems to me that I must have wandered on for several hours, maintaining as direct a course of progression as I could. I had a compass-a thing that I always carry with me; but it refused to function, and I was driven to conclude that there were no magnetic poles in this new world.

Suddenly, as I rounded a pile of the vast amorphous boulders, I came to a human body that lay huddled on the ground, and say incredulously that it was Halpin. The blood still oozed from the fabric of his coat, and the pool it had formed was no larger than when I had begun my journey.

I felt sure that I had not wandered in a circle, as people are said to do amid unfamiliar surroundings. How, then, could I have returned to the scene of my crime? The problem nearly drove me mad as I pondered it; and I set off with frantic vigor in an opposite direction from the one I had first taken.

For all intents and purposes, the scene through which I now passed was identical with the one that lay on the other side of Halpin's corpse. It was hard to believe that the low mounds, the drear levels of dust and ooze and the monstrous boulders, were not the same as those among which I had made my former way. As I went, I took out my watch with the idea of timing my progress; but the hands had stopped at the very moment when I had taken my plunge into unknown space from the laboratory; and though I wound it carefully, it refused to run.

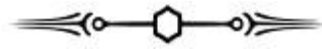
After walking an enormous distance, during which, to my surprise, I felt no fatigue whatever, I came once more to the body I had sought to leave. I think that I went really mad then, for a little while.

Now, after a duration of time-or eternity-which I have no means of computing, I am writing this pencilled account on the leaves of my notebook. I am writing it beside the corpse of Edgar Halpin, from which I have been unable to flee; for a score of excursions into the dim realms on all sides have ended by bringing me back to it after a certain interval. The corpse is still fresh and the blood has not dried. Apparently, the thing we know as time is well-nigh non-existent in this world, or at any rate is seriously disordered in its action; and most of the normal concomitants of time are likewise absent; and space itself has the property of returning always to the same point. The voluntary movements I have performed might be considered as a sort of time-sequence; but in regard to involuntary things there is little or no time-movement. I experience neither physical

weariness or hunger; but the horror of my situation is not to be conveyed in human language; and hell itself can hardly have devised a name for it.

When I have finished writing this narration, I shall precipitate the notebook into the levels of mundane life by means of the infra-red vibrator. Some obscure need of confessing my crime and telling my predicament to others has led me to an act of which I should never have believed myself capable, for I am the most uncommunicative of men by nature. Apart from the satisfying of this need, the composition of my narrative is something to do, it is a temporary reprieve from the desperate madness that will surge upon me soon, and the grey eternal horror of the limbo to which I have doomed myself beside the undecaying body of my victim.

The Root of Ampoi



A CIRCUS HAD arrived in Auburn. The siding at the station was crowded with long lines of cars from which issued a medley of exotic howls, growls, snarls and trumpetings. Elephants and zebras and dromedaries were led along the main streets; and many of the freaks and performers wandered about the town.

Two bearded ladies passed with the graceful air and walk of women of fashion. Then came a whole troupe of midgets, trudging along with the look of mournful, sophisticated children. And then I saw the giant, who was slightly more than eight feet tall and magnificently built, with no sign of the disproportion which often attends giantism. He was merely a fine physical specimen of the ordinary man, somewhat more than life-size. And even at first glance, there was something about his features and his gait which suggested a seaman.

I am a doctor; and the man provoked my medical curiosity. His abnormal bulk and height, without trace of acromegaly, was something I had never happened to meet before.

He must have felt my interest, for he returned my gaze with a speculative eye; and then, lurching in sailor-like fashion, he came over to me.

“I say, sir, could a chap buy a drink in this ’ere town?” He queried cautiously.

I made a quick decision.

“Come with me,” I replied. “I’m an allopath; and I can tell without asking that you’re a sick man.”

We were only a block from my office. I steered the giant up the stairs and into my private sanctum. He almost filled the place, even when he sat down at my urging. I brought out a bottle of rye and poured a liberal glassful for him. He downed it with manifest appreciation. He had worn an air of mild depression when I first met him; now he began to brighten.

“You wouldn’t think, to look at me, that I wasn’t always a bloomin’ giant,” he soliloquized.

“Have another drink,” I suggested.

After the second glass, he resumed a little mournfully: “No, sir, Jim Knox wasn’t always a damn circus freak.”

Then, with little urging on my part, he told me his story.

Knox, an adventurous Cockney, had followed half the seas of the world as a common sailor and boatswain in his younger years. He had visited many strange places, had known many bizarre experiences. Before he had reached the age of thirty, his restless and daring disposition led him to undertake an incredibly fantastic quest.

The events preceding this quest were somewhat unusual in themselves. Ship-wrecked by a wild typhoon in the Banda Sea, and apparently the one survivor, Knox had drifted for two days on a hatch torn from the battered and sinking vessel. Then, rescued by a native-fishing-proa, he had been carried to Salawatti.

The Rajah of Salawatti, an old and monkey-like Malay, was very nice to Knox. The Rajah was a teller of voluminous tales; and the boatswain was a patient listener. On this basis of congeniality, Knox became an honored guest for a month or more in the Rajah’s palace. Here; among other wonders retailed by his host, he heard for the first time the rumor of a most remarkable Papuan tribe.

This unique tribe dwelt on a well-nigh inaccessible plateau of the Arfak Mountains. The women were nine feet tall and white as milk; but the men, strangely, were of normal stature and darker hue. They were friendly to the rare travelers who reached their domains; and they would trade for glass beads and mirrors the pigeon's blood rubies in which their mountainsides abounded. As proof of the latter statement, the Rajah showed Knox a large, flawless, uncut ruby, which he claimed had come from this region.

Knox was hardly inclined to credit the item about the giant women; but the rubies sounded far less improbable. It was characteristic of him that, with little thought of danger, difficulty, or the sheer absurdity of such a venture, he made up his mind at once to visit the Arfak Mountains.

Bidding farewell to his host, who mourned the loss of a good listener, he continued his odyssey. By means that he failed to specify in his history, Knox procured two sackfuls of mirrors and glass beads, and managed to reach the coast of northwestern New Guinea. At Andai, in Arrak, he hired a guide who purported to know the whereabouts of the giant Amazons, and struck boldly inland toward the mountains.

The guide, who was half Malay and half Papuan, bore one of the sacks of baubles on his shoulders; and Knox carried the other. He fondly hoped to return with the two sacks full of smouldering dark-red rubies.

It was a little known land. Some of the peoples were reputed to be head-hunters and cannibals; but Knox found them friendly enough. But somehow, as they went on, the guide began to exhibit a growing haziness in his geography. When they reached the middle slopes of the Arfak range, Knox realized that the guide knew little more than he himself regarding the location of the fabulous ruby-strewn plateau.

They went on through the steepening forest. Before them, above trees that were still tall and semi-tropical, arose the granite scarps and crags of a

high mountain wall, behind which the afternoon sun had disappeared. In the early twilight, they camped at the foot of a seemingly insuperable cliff.

Knox awoke in a blazing yellow dawn, to discover that his guide had departed, taking one of the sacks, of trinkets — which, from a savage viewpoint, would constitute enough capital to set the fellow up in business for life. Knox shrugged his shoulders and swore a little. The guide wasn't much of a loss; but he didn't like having his jewel-purchasing power diminished by half.

He looked at the cliffs above. Tier on tier they towered in the glow of dawn, with tops scarce distinguishable from the clouds about them. Somehow, the more he looked the surer he became that they were the cliffs which guarded the hidden plateau. With their silence and inaccessible solitude, their air of eternal reserve and remoteness, they couldn't be anything else but the ramparts of a realm of titan women and pigeons' blood rubies.

He shouldered his pack and followed the granite wall in search of a likely starting-place for the climb he had determined to attempt. The upright rock was smooth as a metal sheet, and didn't offer a toehold for a spider monkey. But at last he came to a deep chasm which formed the bed of a summer-dried cataract. He began to ascend the chasm, which was no mean feat in itself, for the stream-bed was a series of high shelves, like a giant stairway.

Half the time he dangled by his fingers without a toehold, or stretched on tiptoe and felt precariously for a finger-grip. The climb was a ticklish business, with death on the pointed rocks below as the penalty, of the least miscalculation.

He dared not look back on the way he had climbed in that giddy chasm. Toward noon, he saw above him the menacing overhang of a huge crag,

where the straitening gully ceased in a black-mouthed cavern.

He scrambled up the final shelf into the cave, hoping that it led, as was likely, to an upper entrance made by the mountain torrent. By the light of struck matches, he scaled a slippery incline. The cave soon narrowed; and Knox could often brace himself between the walls, as if in a chimney's interior.

After long upward groping, he discerned a tiny glimmering ahead, like a pin-prick in the solid gloom. Knox, nearly worn out with his efforts, was immensely heartened. But again the cave narrowed till he could squeeze no farther with the pack on his back. He slid back a little distance and removed the sack, which he then proceeded to push before him up a declivity of forty-five degrees. In those days, Knox was of average height and somewhat slender; but even so, he could barely wriggle through the last ten feet of the cavern.

He gave the sack a final heave and landed it on the surface without. Then he squirmed through the opening and fell exhausted in the sunlight. He lay almost at the fountain-head of the dried stream, in a saucerlike hollow at the foot of a gentle slope of granite beyond whose bare ridge the clouds were white and near.

Knox congratulated himself on his gift as an alpine climber. He felt no doubt whatever that he had reached the threshold of the hidden realm of rubies and giant women.

Suddenly, as he lay there, several men appeared against the clouds, on the ridge above. Striding like mountaineers, they came toward him with excited jabberings and gestures of amazement; and he rose and stood awaiting them.

Knox must have been a singular spectacle. His clothing and face were bestreaked with dirt and with the stains of parti-colored ores acquired in his

passage through the cavern. The approaching men seemed to regard him with a sort of awe.

They were dressed in short reddish-purple tunics, and wore leather sandals. They did not belong to any of the lowland types: their skin was a light sienna, and their features were good even according to European standards. All were armed with long javelins but seemed friendly. Wide-eyed, and apparently, somewhat timorous, they addressed Knox in a language which bore no likeness to any Melanesian tongue he had ever heard.

He replied in all the languages of which he had the least smattering: but plainly they could not understand him. Then he untied his sack, took out a double handful of beads, and tried to convey by pantomime the information that he was a trader from remote lands.

The men nodded their heads. Beckoning him to follow them, they returned toward the cloud-rimmed ridge. Knox trudged along behind them, feeling quite sure that he had found the people of the Rajah's tale.

Topping the ridge, he saw the perspectives of a long plateau, full of woods, streams and cultivated fields. In the mild and slanting sunlight, he and his guides descended a path among flowering willow-herbs and rhododendrons to the plateau. There it soon became a well-trodden road, running through forests of dammar and fields of wheat. Houses of rough-hewn stone with thatched roofs, evincing a higher civilization than the huts of the Papuan seaboard, began to appear at intervals.

Men, garbed in the same style as Knox's guides, were working in the fields. Then Knox perceived several women, standing together in an idle group. Now he was compelled to believe the whole story about the hidden people, for these women were eight feet or more in height and had the proportions of shapely goddesses! Their complexion was not of a milky

fairness, as in the Rajah's tale, but was tawny and cream-like and many shades lighter than that of the men. Knox felt a jubilant excitement as they turned their calm gaze upon him and watched him with the air of majestic statues. He had found the legendary realm; and he peered among the pebbles and grasses of the wayside, half expecting to see them intersown with rubies. None was in evidence, however.

A town appeared, circling a sapphire lake with onestoried but well-built houses laid out in regular streets. Many people were strolling or standing about; and all the women were tawny giantesses, and all the men were of average stature, with umber or sienna complexions.

A crowd gathered about Knox; and his guides were questioned in a quite peremptory manner by some of the titan females, who eyed the boatswain with embarrassing intentions. He divined at once the respect and obeisance paid these women by the men, and inferred the superior position which they held. They all wore the tranquil and assured look of empresses.

Knox was led to a building near the lake. It was larger and more pretentious than the others. The roomy interior was arrayed with roughly pictured fabrics and furnished with chairs and couches of ebony. The general effect was rudely sybaritic and palatial, and much enhanced by the unusual height of the ceilings.

In a sort of audience-room, a woman sat enthroned on a broad dais. Several others stood about her like a bodyguard. She wore no crown, no jewels, and her dress differed in no wise from the short kilts of the other women. But Knox knew that he had entered the presence of a queen. The woman was fairer than the rest, with long rippling chestnut hair and fine oval features. The gaze that she turned upon Knox was filled with a feminine mingling of mildness and severity.

The boatswain assumed his most gallant manner, which must have been a little nullified by his dirtsmear'd face and apparel. He bowed before the giantess; and she addressed him with a few soft words in which he sensed a courteous welcome. Then he opened his pack and selected a mirror and a string of blue beads, which he offered to the queen. She accepted the gifts gravely, showing neither pleasure nor surprise.

After dismissing the men who had brought Knox to her presence, the queen turned and spoke to her female attendants. They came forward and gave Knox to understand that he must accompany them. They led him to an open court, containing a huge bath fed by the waters of the blue lake. Here, in spite of his protests and strugglings, they undressed him as if he had been a little boy. Then they plunged him into the water and scrubbed him thoroughly with scrapers of stiff vegetable fiber. One of them brought him a brown tunic and a pair of sandals in lieu of his former raiment.

Though somewhat discomforted and abashed by his summary treatment, Knox couldn't help feeling like a different man after his renovation. And when the women brought in a meal of taro and millet-cake and roast pigeon, piled on enormous platters, he began to forgive them for his embarrassment.

Two of his fair attendants remained with him during the meal; and afterwards they gave him a lesson in their language by pointing at various objects and naming them. Knox soon acquired a knowledge of much domestic nomenclature.

The queen herself appeared later and proceeded to take a hand in his instruction. Her name, he learned, was Mabousa. Knox was an apt pupil; and the day's lesson was plainly satisfactory to all concerned. Knox realized more clearly than before that the queen was a beautiful woman; but he wished that she was not quite so large and imposing. He felt so juvenile beside her. The queen, on her part, seemed to regard Knox with a far from

unfavorable gravity. He saw that she was giving him a good deal of thought and consideration

Knox almost forgot the rubies of which he had come in search; and when he remembered them, he decided to wait till he had learned more of the language before broaching the subject.

A room in the palace was assigned to him; and he inferred that he could remain indefinitely as Mabousa's guest. He ate at the same table with the queen and a half-dozen attendants. It seemed that he was the only man in the establishment. The chairs were all designed for giantesses, with one exception, which resembled the high chair in which a child sits at table amongst its elders. Knox occupied this chair.

Many days went by; and he learned enough of the language for all practical purposes. It was a tranquil but far from unpleasant life. He soon grew familiar with the general conditions of life in the country ruled by Mabousa, which was called Ondoar. It was quite isolated from the world without, for the mountain walls around it could be scaled only at the point which Knox had so fortuitously discovered. Few strangers had ever obtained entrance. The people were prosperous and contented, leading a pastoral existence under the benign but absolute matriarchy of Mabousa. The women governed their husbands by sheer virtue of physical superiority; but there seemed to be fully as much domestic amity as in the households of countries where a reverse dominion prevails.

Knox wondered greatly about the superior stature of the women, which struck him as being a strange provision of nature. Somehow he did not venture to ask any questions; and no one volunteered to tell him the secret.

He kept an eye open for rubies, and was puzzled by the paucity of these gems. A few inferior rubies, as well as small sapphires and emeralds, were worn by some of the men as ear-ring pendants, though none of the women

was addicted to such ornaments. Knox wondered if they didn't have a lot of rubies stored away somewhere. He had come there to trade for red corundum and had carried a whole sack-load of the requisite medium of barter up an impossible mountainside; so he was loath to relinquish the idea.

One day he resolved to open the subject with Mabousa. For some reason, he never quite knew why, it was hard to speak of such matters to the dignified and lovely giantess. But business was business.

He was groping for suitable words, when he suddenly noticed that Mabousa too had something on her mind. She had grown uncommonly silent and the way she kept looking at him was disconcerting and even embarrassing. He wondered what was the matter; also, he began to wonder if these people were cannibalistic. Her gaze was so eager and avid.

Before he could speak of the rubies and his willingness to buy them with glass beads, Mabousa startled him by coming out with a flatly phrased proposal of marriage. To say the least, Knox was unprepared. But it seemed uncivil, as well as unpolitic, to refuse. He had never been proposed to before by a queen or a giantess, and he thought it would be hardly the proper etiquette to decline a heart and hand of such capacity. Also, as Mabousa's husband, he would be in a most advantageous position to negotiate for rubies. And Mabousa was undeniably attractive, even though she was built on a grand scale. After a little hemming and hawing, he accepted her proposal, and was literally swept off his feet as the lady gathered him to the gargantuan charms of her bosom.

The wedding proved to be a very simple affair: a mere matter of verbal agreement in the presence of several female witnesses. Knox was amazed by the ease and rapidity with which he assumed the bonds of holy matrimony.

He learned a lot of things from his marriage with Mabousa. He found at the wedding-supper that the high chair he had been occupying at the royal table was usually reserved for the queen's consort. Later, he learned the secret of the women's size and stature. All the children, boys and girls, were of ordinary size at birth; but the girls were fed by their mothers on a certain root which caused them to increase in height and bulk beyond the natural limits.

The root was gathered on the highest mountain slopes. Its peculiar virtue was mainly due to a mode of preparation whose secret had been carefully guarded by the women and handed down from mother to daughter. Its use had been known for several generations. At one time the men had been the ruling sex; but an accidental discovery of the root by a down-trodden wife named Ampoi had soon led to a reversal of this domination. In consequence the memory of Ampoi was highly venerated by the females, as that of a savior.

Knox also acquired much other information, on matters both social and domestic. But nothing was ever said about rubies. He was forced to decide that the plenitude of these jewels in Ondoar must have been sheer fable; a purely decorative addition to the story of the giant Amazons.

His marriage led to other disillusionments. As the queen's consort, he had expected to have a share in the government of Ondoar, and had looked forward to a few kingly prerogatives. But he soon found that he was merely a male adjunct of Mabousa, with no legal rights, no privileges other than those which she, out of wifely affection, might choose to accord him. She was kind and loving, but also strong-minded, not to say bossy; and he learned that he couldn't do anything or go anywhere without first consulting her and obtaining permission.

She would sometimes reprimand him, would often set him right on some point of Ondoarian etiquette, or the general conduct of life, in a sweet but strict manner; and it never occurred to her that he might even wish to dispute any of her mandates. He, however, was irked more and more by this feminine tyranny. His male pride, his manly British spirit, revolted. If the lady had been of suitable size he would, in his own phrase, “have knocked her about a little.” But, under the circumstances, any attempt to chasten her by main strength hardly seemed advisable.

Along with all this, he grew quite fond of her in his fashion. There were many things that endeared her to him; and he felt that she would be an exemplary wife, if there were only some way of curbing her deplorable tendency to domineer.

Time went on, as it has a habit of doing. Mabousa seemed to be well enough satisfied with her spouse. But Knox brooded a good deal over the false position in which he felt that she had placed him, and the daily injury to his manhood. He wished that there were some way of correcting matters, and of asserting his natural rights and putting Mabousa in her place.

One day he remembered the root on which the women of Ondoar were fed. Why couldn't he get hold of some of it and grow big himself like Mabousa, or bigger? Then he would be able to handle her in the proper style. The more he thought about it, the more this appealed to him as the ideal solution of his marital difficulties.

The main problem, however, was to obtain the root. He questioned some of the other men in a discreet way, but none of them could tell him anything about it. The women never permitted the men to accompany them when they gathered the stuff; and the process of preparing it for consumption was carried on in deep caverns. Several men had dared to steal the food in past years; two of them, indeed, had grown to giant stature on what they had

stolen. But all had been punished by the women with life-long exile from Ondoar.

All this was rather discouraging. Also, it served to increase Knox's contempt for the men of Ondoar, whom he looked upon as a spineless, effeminate lot. However, he didn't give up his plan. But, after much deliberation and scheming, he found himself no nearer to a solution of the problem than before.

Perhaps he would have resigned himself, as better men have done, to an inevitable life-long henpecking. But at last, in the birth of a female baby to Mabousa and himself, he found the opportunity he had been seeking.

The child was like any other girl infant, and Knox was no less proud of it, no less imbued with the customary parental sentiments, than other fathers have been. It did not occur to him, till the baby was old enough to be weaned and fed on the special food, that he would now have in his own home a first-rate chance to appropriate some of this food for his personal use.

The simple and artless Mabousa was wholly without suspicion of such unlawful designs. Male obedience to the feministic law of the land was so thoroughly taken for granted that she even showed him the strange foodstuff and often fed the child in his presence. Nor did she conceal from him the large earthen jar in which she kept her reserve supply.

The jar stood in the palace kitchen, among others filled with more ordinary staples of diet. One day, when Mabousa had gone to the country on some political errand, and the waiting women were all preoccupied with other than culinary matters, Knox stole into the kitchen and carried away a small bagful of the stuff, which he then hid in his own room. In his fear of detection, he felt more of an actual thrill than at any time since the boyhood

days when he had pilfered apples from London street-barrows behind the backs of the vendors.

The stuff looked like a fine variety of sago, and had an aromatic smell and spicy taste. Knox ate a little of it at once but dared not indulge himself to the extent of a full meal for fear that the consequences would be visible. He had watched the incredible growth of the child, which had gained the proportions of a normal six-year old girl in a fortnight under the influence of the miraculous nutrient; and he did not wish to have his theft discovered, and the further use of the food prevented, in the first stage of his own development to ward gianthood.

He felt that some sort of seclusion would be advisable till he could attain the bulk and stature which would ensure a position as master in his own household. He must somehow remove himself from all female supervision during the period of growth.

This, for one so thoroughly subject to petticoat government, with all his goings and comings minutely regulated, was no mean problem. But again fortune favored Knox: for the hunting season in Ondoar had now arrived; a season in which many of the men were permitted by their wives to visit the higher mountains and spend days or weeks in tracking down a certain agile species of alpine deer, known as the oklah.

Perhaps Mabousa wondered a little at the sudden interest shown by Knox in oklah-hunting, and his equally sudden devotion to practice with the javelins used by the hunters. But she saw no reason for denying him permission to make the desired trip; merely stipulating that he should go in company with certain other dutiful husbands, and should be very careful of dangerous cliffs and crevasses.

The company of other husbands was not exactly in accord with Knox's plan; but he knew better than to argue the point. He had contrived to make

several more visits to the palace pantry, and had stolen enough of the forbidden food to turn him into a robust and wifetaming titan. Somehow, on that trip among the mountains, in spite of the meek and law-abiding males with whom he was condemned to go, he would find chances to consume all he had stolen. He would return a conquering Anakim, a roaring and swaggering Goliath; and everyone, especially Mabousa, would stand from under.

Knox hid the food, disguised as a bag of millet meal, in his private supply of provisions. He also carried some of it in his pockets, and would eat a mouthful or two whenever the other men weren't looking. And at night, when they were all sleeping quietly, he would steal to the bag and devour the aromatic stuff by the handful.

The result was truly phenomenal, for Knox could watch himself swell after the first square meal. He broadened and shot up inch by inch, to the manifest bewilderment of his companions, none of whom, at first, was imaginative enough to suspect the true reason. He saw them eyeing him with a sort of speculative awe and curiosity, such as civilized people would display before a wild man from Borneo. Obviously they regarded his growth as a kind of biological anomaly, or perhaps as part of the queer behaviour that might well be expected from a foreigner of doubtful antecedents.

The hunters were now in the highest mountains, at the northernmost end of Ondoar. Here, among stupendous riven crags and piled pinnacles, they pursued the elusive oklah; and Knox began to attain a length of limb that enabled him to leap across chasms over which the others could not follow.

At last one or two of them must have gotten suspicious. They took to watching Knox, and one night they surprised him in the act of devouring the sacred food. They tried to warn him, with a sort of holy horror in their

demeanour, that he was doing a dreadful and forbidden thing, and would bring himself the direct consequences.

Knox, who was beginning to feel as well as look like an actual giant, told them to mind their own business. Moreover, he went on to express his frank and uncensored opinion of the sapless, decadent and effeminate males of Ondoar. After that the men left him alone, but murmured fearfully among themselves and watched his every move with apprehensive glances. Knox despised them so thoroughly, that he failed to attach any special significance to the furtive disappearance of two members of the party. Indeed, at the time, he hardly noticed that they had gone.

After a fortnight of alpine climbing, the hunters had slain their due quota of long-horned and goat-footed oklah; and Knox had consumed his entire store of the stolen food and had grown to proportions which, he felt sure, would enable him to subdue his domineering helpmate and show her the proper inferiority of the female sex. It was time to return: Knox's companions would not have dreamt of exceeding the limit set by the women, who had enjoined them to come back at the end of a fortnight; and Knox was eager to demonstrate his new-won superiority of bulk and brawn.

As they came down from the mountains and crossed the cultivated plain, Knox saw that the other men were lagging behind more and more, with a sort of fearfulness and shrinking timidity. He strode on before them, carrying three, full-sized oklah slung over his shoulders, as a lesser man would have carried so many rabbits.

The fields and roads were deserted, and none of the titan women was in sight anywhere. Knox wondered a little about this; but feeling himself so much the master of the general situation, he did not over-exert his mind in curious conjectures.

However, as they approached the town, the desolation and silence became a trifle ominous. Knox's fellowhunters were obviously stricken with dire and growing terror. But Knox did not feel that he should lower his dignity by even asking the reason.

They entered the streets, which were also strangely quiet. There was no evidence of life, other than the pale and frightened faces of a few men that peered from windows and furtively opened doors. At last they came in sight of the palace, Now the mystery was explained, for apparently all the women of Ondoar had gathered in the square before the building! They were drawn up in a massive and appallingly solid formation, like an army of giant Amazons; and their utter stillness was more dreadful than the shouting and tumult of battle-fields. Knox felt an unwilling but irresistible dismay before the swelling thews of their mighty arms, the solemn heaving of gargantuan bosoms, and the awful and austere gaze with which they regarded him in unison.

Suddenly he perceived that he was quite alone — the other men had faded away like shadows, as if they did not even dare to remain and watch his fate. He felt an almost undeniable impulse to flee; but his British valor prevented him from yielding to it. Pace by pace he forced himself to go on toward the embattled women.

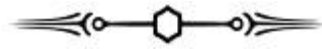
They waited for him in stony silence, immovable as caryatides. He saw Mabousa in the front rank, her serving-women about her. She watched him with eyes in which he could read nothing but unutterable reproach. She did not speak; and somehow the jaunty words with which he had intended to greet her were congealed on his lips.

All at once, with a massed and terrible striding movement, the women surrounded Knox. He lost sight of Mabousa in the solid wall of titanesses. Great, brawny hands were grasping him, tearing the spear from his fingers

and the oklah from his shoulders. He struggled as became a doughty Briton. But one man, even though he had eaten the food of giantesses, could do nothing against the whole tribe of eight-foot females.

Maintaining a silence more formidable than any outcry, they bore him through the town and along the road by which he had entered Ondoar, and up the mountain path to the outmost ramparts of the land. There, from the beetling crag above the gully he had climbed, they lowered him with a tackle of heavy ropes to the dry torrent-bed two hundred feet below, and left him to find his way down the perilous mountainside and back to the outer world that would accept him henceforward only as a circus freak.

Schizoid Creator



IN THE PRIVATE laboratory which his practice as a psychiatrist had enabled him to build, equip and maintain, Dr. Carlos Moreno had completed certain preparations that were hardly in accord with the teachings of modern science. For these preparations he had drawn instruction from old grimoires, bequeathed by ancestors who had incurred the fatherly wrath of the Spanish Inquisition. According to a rather scurrilous family legend, other ancestors had been numbered among the Inquisitors.

At the end of the long room he had cleared the cluttered floor of its equipment, leaving only an immense globe of crystal glass that suggested an aquarium. About the globe he had traced with a consecrated knife, the sorcerers' arthame, a circle inscribed with pentagrams and the various Hebrew names of the Deity. Also, at a distance of several feet, a smaller circle, similarly inscribed.

Wearing a seamless and sleeveless robe of black, he stood now within the smaller, protective circle. Upon his breast and forehead was bound the Double Triangle, wrought perfectly from several metals. A silver lamp, engraved with the same sign, afforded the sole light, shining on a stand beside him. Aloes, camphor and stroax burned in censers set about him on the floor. In his right hand he held the arthame; in his left, a hazel staff with a core of magnetized iron.

Like Dr. Faustus, Moreno designed an evocation of the Devil. But not, however, for the same purpose that had inspired Faustus.

Pondering long and gravely on the painful mysteries of the cosmos, the discrepancy of good and evil, Moreno had at last conceived an explanation

that was startlingly simple.

There could, he reasoned, be only one Creator, God, who was or had been primarily benignant. Yet all the evidence pointed to the co-existence of an evil creative principle, a Satan. God, then, must be a split or dual personality, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, manifesting sometimes as the Devil.

This duality, Moreno argued, must be a form of what is commonly called schizophrenia. He had a profound belief in the efficacy of shock treatment for such disorders. If God, in his aspect as the Devil, could be suitably confined and subjected to treatment, a cure might result. The confused problems of the universe would then resolve themselves under a sane and no longer semi-diabolic Deity.

The glass globe, specially constructed at great expense, contained at one side electrical apparatus of Moreno's own devising. The machine, far more complex than the portable apparatus used in electric shock treatment, could release a voltage powerful enough to electrocute simultaneously all the inmates of a state prison. Moreno considered that no lesser force could effect the shock necessary for the cure of a supernatural personage.

He had memorized an ancient spell for the calling up of the Devil and his confinement within a bottle. The globe would do admirably for the aforesaid bottle.

The spell was a bastard mixture of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Its exact meaning seemed doubtful. It was filled with such terms as Eloha, Tetragrammaton, Kis Elijon, Elohim, Saday and Zevaoth, the names of God. The word Bifrons recurred several times. This was no doubt one of the Devil's numerous names. But there could be only one Devil.

Moreno disregarded as childish those old demonologies that peopled Hell with a multitude of evil spirits, having each his own name, rank and office. All, then, was in readiness. In a firm, sonorous voice which might

have been that of a priest chanting the Mass, he began to recite the incantation. When the summons came Bifrons was busily engaged in amorous dalliance with the she-imp Foti. Like Janus, he was two-faced; and he possessed multiple members. Since Foti herself was somewhat peculiarly formed, their love-making was quite complicated.

Bifrons began to withdraw his members from about the she-imp, 'Some damned sorcerer has gotten hold of that ancient spell containing my name. It's the first time in two hundred years. But I'll have to go.'

'Hurry back,' enjoined Foti, pouting with her four lips, two of which were located in her abdomen.

'If you don't you may find me otherwise occupied.' The air sizzled behind Bifrons in his exit from the infernal regions.

Dr. Moreno felt surprised and even appalled when he saw the being that his incantation had called up in the globe. He had scarcely known what to expect, and had paid little attention to old pictures and descriptions of the Devil, seeing in them only the dementia of mediaeval superstition. But the teratology of this creature seemed incredible. The two faces of Bifrons bloated alternately against the globe's interior; and his arms, legs, body and numerous other parts squirmed and flattened themselves convulsively in a furious effort to escape. But through the thickness of the glass, or the power of the surrounding circle, Bifrons was bottled up as helplessly as any djinn imprisoned by Solomon. He resigned himself presently and began to relax, floating awhile in mid-air, and finally seating himself on Moreno's electrical machine. As if feeling more at home, he looped some of his parts around the various pairs of forceps, ending in electrodes, that projected from a huge and intricate device.

'What the devil do you want?' he bellowed. The glass muffled his voice, which was still sufficiently audible. His tones bespoke anger and

resentment.

‘I want the Devil,’ said Moreno. ‘And I presume that you are he.’

‘The Devil?’ queried Bifrons. ‘It’s true that I’m a devil. But I’m not the Old Man himself. There are many thousands of us, as you should know if you’ve read the demonologists. I’m no infernal prince but merely a subordinate, though with special powers of my own. Again, what do you want? Money? Women? A Senatorship? The Presidency of your cock-eyed republic? Name it, and I’ll grant the wish. I’m in a hellish hurry to get out of here.’

‘You can’t fool me. I know that you are the Devil — the only one in the universe. And I don’t want any of your gifts. All I want is to cure you.’

Bifrons was startled. ‘Cure me? Of what? Say, what kind of a sorcerer are you anyway?’

‘I’m not a sorcerer but a psychiatrist. My name is Dr. Moreno. My hope and intention is to cure you of being the Devil.’

This madhouse doctor must be crazy himself, thought Bifrons. He cogitated. The trend of his cogitations was betrayed only by a sardonic one-sided twist of his left-hand mouth.

‘All right, I’m the Devil,’ he agreed finally. ‘But let’s get this over with. What do you mean to do with me?’

‘Subject you to shock treatment,’ announced the doctor. ‘A very special high-voltage treatment. It should be the best thing for schizophrenia like yours.’

‘Schizo-what?’ roared Bifrons. ‘Do you think I’m a lunatic?’

‘Let me explain. I am using the term schizophrenia in its literal sense, meaning split personality — not as commonly applied to several types of psychic disintegration or regression. I think that you are really a sick Deity. Your illness consists in being Satan part of the time. A genuine case of dual

and alternating egos. The Satanic self dominates at present, otherwise I shouldn't have been able to call you up. But we'll soon remedy all that.'

The demon thought it well to conceal his consternation. He must get back to Hell as soon as possible and make a report. Satan, he felt, would be interested in Dr. Moreno.

'Get on with your treatment,' he enjoined. 'What is it, anyway?'

'Electricity.'

Bifrons assumed an expression of double-faced dismay. 'That's a highly dangerous and destructive force. Do you wish to annihilate me?'

'The result should be different in your case,' said the doctor in his most soothing professional voice. 'Are you ready?'

Bifrons gave a bicephalic nod. Moreno stepped cautiously from the circle and went over to a panel of switches and levers set in the laboratory wall. Watching the demon closely, he began to manipulate one of the levers.

The numerous forceps of the machine, on which Bifrons had so conveniently seated himself, closed themselves on various parts of his anatomy, applying their electrodes to his skin. A pair, hitherto concealed, sprang forth and seized his temples tightly. Moreno grasped a switch firmly and turned on the full voltage. Then, still cautious, he returned to the protective circle.

A shower of sparks and short blue bolts issued from the machine within the globe. In spite of the many forceps that had tightened upon him, Bifrons writhed and tossed like a harpooned octopus. Smoke seemed to pour from his head, body and members, muffling the apparatus that held him captive. Soon a dark-brown cloud, seething and swelling, had filled the globe's interior, concealing everything from view. The cloud was something that Bifrons could emit at will, like the fluid of a cuttle-fish.

As a matter of fact, since his nature was itself electrical, he had absorbed the terrific voltage with merely a mild discomfort. The dark cloud was a necessary screen for the tactics that he now intended to use.

Perhaps, Moreno thought, the treatment had been sufficiently prolonged. He could repeat it if necessary. Emerging once more from his magic shelter, he turned off the switch and reversed the lever that had served to manipulate the forceps. Once again he went back to the circle.

After an interval of silence there issued from the clouded globe a voice which had no resemblance to that of Bifrons. It was both thunderous and mellow. To Moreno's inexperienced ear, it sounded like the Voice that spoke to Moses on the mountain.

'I am cured,' it announced. 'You have restored Me to My Divinity, O wise and beneficent doctor. Pronounce the formula of release and let Me go. Hell is henceforth abolished, together with all evil, sin and disease. The Devil is dead. God alone exists. And God is good.'

Moreno was enraptured, believing that he had realized so quickly his fondest professional hope. Scarcely knowing what he did, he uttered the formula that served to release an imprisoned spirit.

Afterwards he asked, 'Now will You reveal Yourself to me? I would behold You in all Your glory.'

'It cannot be,' the Voice thundered. 'My glory would blast your eyes forever. Therefore the cloud with which I have surrounded myself.'

A moment later the globe burst asunder in flying fragments, like some gigantic bottle of new champagne. The released cloud, billowing vastly and voluminously, seemed to overspread the whole laboratory in an instant. Bifrons, raging behind it but still invisible, proceeded to wreck all of Moreno's equipment like a dozen baboons gone berserk. Tray-laden tables were overturned and smashed into splinters, shelves were pulled down with

a crashing of countless vials and carboys. Coiled tubings were twisted and bent and ripped apart, heavily insulated wires snapped like twine. The old volumes of magic, piled in a corner sprang into flame and burned to ashes in a few seconds. A violent wind, coming as if from nowhere, took up the ashes and scattered them throughout the room.

Moreno, protected by the circle, alone escaped the demon's wrath. He crouched at the circle's center, cowering and gibbering, while the cloud passed away through windows from which every pane had been broken.

Several of his colleagues, coming to consult him that evening, found him still crouching on the wreckage-littered floor. He did not seem to recognize them and had obviously become deranged. His mouthings appeared to indicate a sort of theological mania.

The colleagues held an impromptu consultation of their own. As a result, Moreno was removed gently but forcibly to the same type of institution as that to which he had committed so many of his patients. His friends and fellow-psychiatrists deplored the interruption, perhaps the ending, of an illustrious career.

The wrecking of the laboratory remained a mystery. Had there been an explosion caused by one of Moreno's experiments? Had the doctor himself destroyed his equipment in a state of violent mania? Or — should the occurrence be classified as an act of God?

Fuming at the interruption of his tryst with Foti, Bifrons nevertheless thought it incumbent upon himself to report at once to Satan when he returned to the nether realms.

He found that Master of that picturesque region occupied in caressing a half-flayed girl. The flaying had been done to render the caresses more intimate and more exquisitely agonizing.

Satan listened gravely to the demon's account of Dr. Moreno. His tapering artistic fingers, with long-pointed nails of polished jet, ceased their occupation; and a furrow appeared like a black triangle between his luminous marble brows.

‘This is all very interesting — and rather unfortunate,’ he said. ‘However, you have acted with admirable aplomb and presence of mind. The situation should be well under control as long as Moreno remains in the madhouse where you and his colleagues have landed him.’

He paused, and his fingers resumed in an absent-minded fashion their gentle raking of his victim's lumbar regions.

‘Of course, as you understand, Moreno was quite mad from the start. But lunatics with a speculative bent can sometimes stumble overly close to certain guarded cosmic secrets and there are spells which even I must answer and obey — not to mention the Unspeakable Name, the Shem-hamphorash, which coerces and compels Jehovah. After he recovers from his present state of shock, Moreno might be adjudged sane — and released to continue his researches and experiments.’

‘Such an eventuation must be forestalled permanently. My good Bifrons, you must return immediately to earth and watch over him. I have full trust in your abilities, and I confer upon you plenipotentiary powers. All I ask is, that you keep this doctor well bedeviled and legally insane until the hour of his death.’

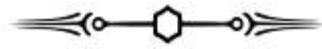
When Bifrons departed, Satan summoned his chief lieutenants before him in the halls of Pandemonium.

‘I am going away for a while,’ he told them. ‘There are certain obligations of a pressing nature that call me — and I must not neglect them too long. In my absence, I consign the management of Hell to your competent hands.’

Bowing reversely, Gorson, Goap, Zimimar and Amaimon, lords of the four quarters, went out one after one, leaving their prince alone. When they had gone, he descended from his globed throne and passed through many corridors and by upward-winding stairs to the small postern door of Hell.

The door swung open without touch of any visible hand. A long white robe seemed to weave itself swiftly from the air about Satan's form. His infernal attributes withered and dropped away. And the long white beard of the Elohim sprouted and flowed down over his bosom as he stepped across the sill into Heaven.

The Seed from the Sepulchre



“YES, I FOUND the place,” said Falmer. “It’s a queer sort of place, pretty much as the legends describe it.” He spat quickly into the fire, as if the act of speech had been physically distasteful to him, and, half averting his face from the scrutiny of Thone, stared with morose and somber eyes into the jungle-matted Venezuelan darkness.

Thone, still weak and dizzy from the fever that had incapacitated him for continuing their journey to its end, was curiously puzzled. Falmer, he thought, had under-gone an inexplicable change during the three days of his absence; a change that was too elusive in some of its phases to be fully defined or delimited.

Other phases, however, were all too obvious. Falmer, even during extreme hardship or illness, had heretofore been unquenchably loquacious and cheerful. Now he seemed sullen, uncommunicative, as if preoccupied with far-off things of disagreeable import. His bluff face had grown hollow – even pointed – and his eyes had narrowed to secretive slits. Thone was troubled by these changes, though he tried to dismiss his impressions as mere distempered fancies due to the influence of the ebbing fever.

“But can’t you tell me what the place was like?”, he persisted.

“There isn’t much to tell,” said Falmer, in a queer grumbling tone. “Just a few crumbling walls and falling pillars.”

“But didn’t you find the burial-pit of the Indian legend, where the gold was supposed to be?”

“I found it – but there was no treasure.” Falmer’s voice had taken on a forbidding surliness; and Thone decided to refrain from further questioning.

“I guess,” he commented lightly, “that we had better stick to orchid hunting. Treasure trove doesn’t seem to be in our line. By the way, did you see any unusual flowers or plants during the trip?”

“Hell, no,” Falmer snapped. His face had gone suddenly ashen in the firelight, and his eyes had assumed a set glare that might have meant either fear or anger. “Shut up, can’t you? I don’t want to talk. I’ve had a headache all day; some damned Venezuelan fever coming on, I suppose. We’d better head for the Orinoco tomorrow. I’ve had all I want of this trip.”

James Falmer and Roderick Thone, professional orchid hunters, with two Indian guides, had been following an obscure tributary of the upper Orinoco. The country was rich in rare flowers; and, beyond its floral wealth, they had been drawn by vague but persistent rumors among the local tribes concerning the existence of a ruined city somewhere on this tributary; a city that contained a burial pit in which vast treasures of gold, silver, and jewels had been interred together with the dead of some nameless people. The two men had thought it worthwhile to investigate these rumors. Thone had fallen sick while they were still a full day’s journey from the site of the ruins, and Falmer had gone on in a canoe with one of the Indians, leaving the other to attend to Thone. He had returned at nightfall of the third day following his departure.

Thone decided after a while, as he lay staring at his companion, that the latter’s taciturnity and moroseness were perhaps due to disappointment over his failure to find the treasure. It must have been that, together with some tropical infection working in the man’s blood. However, he admitted doubtfully to himself, it was not like Falmer to be disappointed or downcast under such circumstances. Falmer did not speak again, but sat glaring before him as if he saw something invisible to others beyond the labyrinth of fire-touched boughs and lianas in which the whispering, stealthy

darkness crouched. Somehow, there was a shadowy fear in his aspect. Thone continued to watch him, and saw that the Indians, impassive and cryptic, were also watching him, as if with some obscure expectancy. The riddle was too much for Thone, and he gave it up after a while, lapsing into restless, fever-turbulent slumber from which he awakened at intervals, to see the set face of Falmer, dimmer and more distorted each time with the slowly dying fire and the invading shadows.

Thone felt stronger in the morning: his brain was clear, his pulse tranquil once more; and he saw with mounting concern the indisposition of Falmer, who seemed to rouse and exert himself with great difficulty, speaking hardly a word and moving with singular stiffness and sluggishness. He appeared to have forgotten his announced project of returning toward the Orinoco, and Thone took entire charge of the preparations for departure. His companion's condition puzzled him more and more – apparently there was no fever and the symptoms were wholly ambiguous. However, on general principles, he administered a stiff dose of quinine to Falmer before they started.

The paling saffron of sultry dawn sifted upon them through the jungle tops as they loaded their belongings into the dugouts and pushed off down the slow current. Thone sat near the bow of one of the boats, with Falmer in the rear, and a large bundle of orchid roots and part of their equipment filling the middle. The two Indians occupied the other boat, together with the rest of the supplies.

It was a monotonous journey. The river wound like a sluggish olive snake between dark, interminable walls of forest, from which the goblin faces of orchids leered. There were no sounds other than the splash of paddles, the furious chattering of monkeys, and petulant cries of fiery-

colored birds. The sun rose above the jungle and poured down a tide of torrid brilliance.

Thone rowed steadily looking back over his shoulder at times to address Falmer with some casual remark or friendly question. The latter, with dazed eyes and features queerly pale and pinched in the sunlight, sat dully erect and made no effort to use his paddle. He offered no reply to the queries of Thone, but shook his head at intervals, with a sort of shuddering motion that was plainly involuntary. After a while he began to moan thickly, as if in pain or delirium.

They went on in this manner for hours. The heat grew more oppressive between the stifling walls of jungle. Thone became aware of a shriller cadence in the moans of his companion. Looking back, he saw that Falmer had removed his sun-helmet, seemingly oblivious of the murderous heat, and was clawing at the crown of his head with frantic fingers. Convulsions shook his entire body, the dugout began to rock dangerously as he tossed to and fro in a paroxysm of manifest agony. His voice mounted to a high un-human shrieking.

Thone made a quick decision. There was a break in the lining palisade of somber forest, and he headed the boat for shore immediately. The Indians followed, whispering between themselves and eyeing the sick man with glances of apprehensive awe and terror that puzzled Thone tremendously. He felt that there was some devilish mystery about the whole affair; and he could not imagine what was wrong with Falmer. All the known manifestations of malignant tropical diseases rose before him like a rout of hideous fantasies; but among them, he could not recognize the thing that had assailed his companion.

Having gotten Falmer ashore on a semicircle of liana-latticed beach without the aid of the Indians, who seemed unwilling to approach the sick

man, Thone administered a heavy hypodermic injection of morphine from his medicine chest. This appeared to ease Falmer's suffering, and the convulsions ceased. Thone, taking advantage of their remission, proceeded to examine the crown of Falmer's head.

He was startled to find, amid the thick dishevelled hair, a hard and pointed lump which resembled the tip of a beginning horn, rising under the still-unbroken skin. As if endowed with erectile and resistless life, it seemed to grow beneath his fingers.

At the same time, abruptly and mysteriously, Falmer opened his eyes and appeared to regain full consciousness; For a few minutes he was more his normal self than at any time since his return from the ruins. He began to talk, as if anxious to relieve his mind of some oppressing burden. His voice was peculiarly thick and toneless, but Thone was able to follow his mutterings and piece them together.

"The pit! The pit!", said Falmer. "The infernal thing that was in the pit, in the deep sepulcher!... I wouldn't go back there for the treasure of a dozen El Dorados... I didn't tell you much about those ruins, Thone. Somehow it was hard – impossibly hard – to talk."

"I guess the Indian knew there was something wrong with the ruins. He led me to the place... but he wouldn't tell me anything about it; and he waited by the riverside while I searched for the treasure.

"Great grey walls there were, older than the jungle: old as death and time. They must have been quarried and reared by people from some lost planet. They loomed and leaned at mad, unnatural angles, threatening to crush the trees about them. And there were columns, too: thick, swollen columns of unholy form, whose abominable carvings the jungle had not wholly screened from view.

“There was no trouble finding that accursed burial pit. The pavement above had broken through quite recently, I think. A big tree had pried with its boa-like roots between the flagstones that were buried beneath centuries of mold. One of the flags had been tilted back on the pavement, and another had fallen through into the pit. There was a large hole, whose bottom I could see dimly in the forest-strangled light. Something glimmered palely at the bottom; but I could not be sure what it was.

“I had taken along a coil of rope, as you remember. I tied one end of it to a main root of the tree, dropped the other through the opening, and went down like a monkey. When I got to the bottom I could see little at first in the gloom, except the whitish glimmering all around me, at my feet. Something that was unspeakably brittle and friable crunched beneath me when I began to move. I turned on my flashlight, and saw that the place was fairly littered with bones. Human skeletons lay tumbled everywhere. They must have been removed long ago... I groped around amid the bones and dust, feeling pretty much like a ghoul, but couldn't find anything of value, not even a bracelet or a finger-ring on any of the skeletons.

“It wasn't until I thought of climbing out that I noticed the real horror. In one of the corners – the corner nearest to the opening in the roof – I looked up and saw it in the webby shadows. Ten feet above my head it hung, and I had almost touched it, unknowingly, when I descended the rope.

“It looked like a sort of white lattice-work at first. Then I saw that the lattice was partly formed of human bones – a complete skeleton, very tall and stalwart, like that of a warrior. A pale withered thing grew out of the skull, like a set of fantastic antlers ending in myriads of long and stringy tendrils that had spread upward till they reached the roof. They must have lifted the skeleton, or body, along with them as they climbed.

“I examined the thing with my flashlight. It must have been a plant of some sort, and apparently it had started to grow in the cranium: Some of the branches had issued from the cloven crown, others through the eye holes, the mouth, and the nose holes, to flare upward. And the roots of the blasphemous thing had gone downward, trellising themselves on every bone. The very toes and fingers were ringed with them, and they drooped in writhing coils. Worst of all, the ones that had issued from the toe-ends were rooted in a second skull, which dangled just below, with fragments of the broken-off root system. There was a litter of fallen bones on the floor in the corner.

“The sight made me feel a little weak, somehow, and more than a little nauseated that abhorrent, inexplicable mingling of the human and the plant. I started to climb the rope, in a feverish hurry to get out, but the thing fascinated me in its abominable fashion, and I couldn’t help pausing, to study it a little more when I had climbed halfway. I leaned toward it too fast, I guess, and the rope began to sway, bringing my face lightly against the leprous, antler-shaped boughs above the skull.

“Something broke – possibly a sort of pod on one of the branches. I found my head enveloped in a cloud of pearl-grey powder, very light, fine, and scentless. The stuff settled on my hair, it got into my nose and eyes, nearly choking and blinding me. I shook it off as well as I could. Then I climbed on and pulled myself through the opening...”

As if the effort of coherent narration had been too heavy a strain, Falmer lapsed into disconnected mumblings. The mysterious malady, whatever it was, returned upon him, and his delirious ramblings were mixed with groans of torture. But at moments he regained a flash of coherence.

“My head! My head!” he muttered. “There must be something in my brain, something that grows and spreads; I tell you, I can feel it there. I

haven't felt right at any time since I left the burial pit... My mind has been queer ever since. It must have been the spores of the ancient devil-plant... The spores have taken root... The thing is splitting my skull, going down into my brain – a plant that springs out of a human cranium – as if from a flower pot!”

The dreadful convulsions began once more, and Falmer writhed uncontrollably in his companion's arms, shrieking with agony. Thone, sick at heart and shocked by his sufferings, abandoned all effort to restrain him and took up the hypodermic. With much difficulty, he managed to inject a triple dose, and Falmer grew quiet by degrees, and lay with open glassy eyes, breathing stertorously. Thone, for the first time, perceived an odd protrusion of his eyeballs, which seemed about to start from their sockets, making it impossible for the lids to close, and lending the drawn features an expression of mad horror. It was as if something were pushing Falmer's eyes from his head.

Thone, trembling with sudden weakness and terror, felt that he was involved in some unnatural web of nightmare. He could not, dared not, believe the story Falmer had told him, and its implications. Assuring himself that his companion had imagined it all, had been ill throughout with the incubation of some strange fever, he stooped over and found that the horn-shaped lump on Falmer's head had now broken through the skin.

With a sense of unreality, he stared at the object that his prying fingers had revealed amid the matted hair. It was unmistakably a plant-bud of some sort, with involuted folds of pale green and bloody pink that seemed about to expand. The thing issued from above the central suture of the skull.

A nausea swept upon Thone, and he recoiled from the lolling head and its baleful outgrowth, averting his gaze. His fever was returning, there was a woeful debility in all his limbs, and he heard the muttering voice of

delirium through the quinine-induced ringing in his ears. His eyes blurred with a deathly and miasmal mist.

He fought to subdue his illness and impotence. He must not give way to it wholly; he must go on with Falmer and the Indians and reach the nearest trading station, many days away on the Orinoco, where Falmer could receive aid.

As if through sheer volition, his eyes cleared, and he felt a resurgence of strength. He looked around for the guides, and saw, with a start of uncomprehending surprise, that they had vanished. Peering further, he observed that one of the boats – the dugout used by the Indians – had also disappeared. It was plain that he and Falmer had been deserted. Perhaps the Indians had known what was wrong with the sick man, and had been afraid. At any rate, they were gone, and they had taken much of the camp equipment and most of the provisions with them.

Thone turned once more to the supine body of Falmer, conquering his repugnance with effort. Resolutely he drew out his clasp knife and, stooping over the stricken man, he excised the protruding bud, cutting as close to the scalp as he could with safety. The thing was unnaturally tough and rubbery; it exuded a thin, sanguinous fluid; and he shuddered when he saw its internal structure, full of nerve-like filaments, with a core that suggested cartilage.

He flung it aside, quickly, on, the river sand. Then, lifting Falmer in his arms, he lurched and staggered towards the remaining boat. He fell more than once, and lay half swooning across the inert body. Alternately carrying and dragging his burden, he reached the boat at last. With the remainder of his failing strength, he contrived to prop Falmer in the stern against the pile of equipment.

His fever was mounting apace. After much delay, with tedious, half-delirious exertions, he pushed off from the shore, till the fever mastered him wholly and the oar slipped from oblivious fingers...

He awoke in the yellow glare of dawn, with his brain and his senses comparatively clear. His illness had left a great languor, but his first thought was of Falmer. He twisted about, nearly falling overboard in his debility, and sat facing his companion.

Falmer still reclined, half sitting, half lying, against the pile of blankets and other impedimenta. His knees were drawn up, his hands clasping them as if in tetanic rigor. His features had grown as stark and ghastly as those of a dead man, and his whole aspect was one of mortal rigidity. It was this, however, that caused Thone to gasp with unbelieving horror.

During the interim of Thone's delirium and his lapse into slumber, the monstrous plant bud, merely stimulated, it would seem, by the act of excision, had grown again with preternatural rapidity, from Falmer's head. A loathsome pale-green stem was mounting thickly, and had started to branch like antlers after attaining a height of six or seven inches.

More dreadful than this, if possible, similar growths had issued from the eyes; and their stems, climbing vertically across the forehead, had entirely displaced the eyeballs. Already they were branching like the thing from the crown. The antlers were all tipped with pale vermilion. They appeared to quiver with repulsive animations, nodding rhythmically in the warm, windless air... From the mouth another stem protruded, curling upward like a long and whitish tongue. It had not yet begun to bifurcate.

Thone closed his eyes to shut away the shocking vision. Behind his lids, in a yellow dazzle of light, he still saw the cadaverous features, the climbing stems that quivered against the dawn like ghastly hydras of tomb-etiolated green. They seemed to be waving toward him, growing and

lengthening as they waved. He opened his eyes again, and fancied, with a start of new terror; that the antlers were actually taller than they had been a few moments previous.

After that, he sat watching them in a sort of baleful hypnosis. The illusion of the plant's visible growth, and freer movement – if it were illusion – increased upon him. Falmer, however, did not stir, and his parchment face appeared to shrivel and fall in, as if the roots of the growth were draining his blood, were devouring his very flesh in their insatiable and ghoulish hunger.

Thone wrenched his eyes away and stared at the river shore. The stream had widened and the current had grown more sluggish. He sought to recognize their location, looking vainly for some familiar landmark in the monotonous dull-green cliffs of jungle that lined the margin. He felt hopelessly lost and alienated. He seemed to be drifting on an unknown tide of madness and nightmare, accompanied by something more frightful than corruption itself.

His mind began to wander with an odd inconsequence, coming back always, in a sort of closed circle, to the thing that was devouring Falmer. With a flash of scientific curiosity, he found himself wondering to what genus it belonged. It was neither fungus nor pitcher plant, nor anything that he had ever encountered or heard of in his explorations. It must have come, as Falmer had suggested, from an alien world: it was nothing that the earth could conceivably have nourished

He felt, with a comforting assurance, that Falmer was dead. That at least, was a mercy. But even as he shaped the thought he heard a low, guttural moaning, and, peering at Falmer in a horrible startlement, saw that his limbs and body were twitching slightly. The twitching increased, and took on a rhythmic regularity, though at no time did it resemble the agonized and

violent convulsions of the previous day. It was plainly automatic, like a sort of galvanism; and Thone saw that it was timed with the languorous and loathsome swaying of the plant. The effect on the watcher was insidiously mesmeric and somnolent; and once he caught himself beating the detestable rhythm with his foot.

He tried to pull himself together, groping desperately for something to which his sanity could cling. Ineluctably, his illness returned: fever, nausea, and revulsion worse than the loathliness of death... But before he yielded to it utterly, he drew his loaded revolver from the holster and fired six times into Falmer's quivering body... He knew that he had not missed, but after the final bullet Falmer still moaned and twitched in unison with the evil swaying of the plant, and Thone, sliding into delirium, heard still the ceaseless, automatic moaning.

There was no time in the world of seething unreality and shoreless oblivion through which he drifted. When he came to himself again, he could not know if hours or weeks had elapsed. But he knew at once that the boat was no longer moving; and lifting himself dizzily, he saw that it had floated into shallow water and mud and was nosing the beach of a tiny, jungle-tufted isle in mid-river. The putrid odor of slime was about him like a stagnant pool; and he heard a strident humming of insects.

It was either late morning or early afternoon, for the sun was high in the still heavens. Lianas were drooping above him from the island trees like uncoiled serpents, and epiphytic orchids, marked with ophidian mottlings, leaned toward him grotesquely from lowering boughs. Immense butterflies went past on sumptuously spotted wings.

He sat up, feeling very giddy and lightheaded, and faced again the horror that accompanied him. The thing had grown incredibly: the three-antlered stems, mounting above Falmer's head, had become gigantic and had put out

masses of ropy feelers that tossed uneasily in the air, as if searching for support – or new provender. In the topmost antlers a prodigious blossom had opened – a sort of fleshy disk, broad as a man's face and white as leprosy.

Falmer's features had shrunk till the outlines of every bone were visible as if beneath tightened paper. He was a mere death's head in a mask of human skin; and beneath his clothing the body was little more than a skeleton. He was quite still now, except for the communicated quivering of the stems. The atrocious plant had sucked-him dry, had eaten his vitals and his flesh.

Thone wanted to hurl himself forward in a mad impulse to grapple with the growth. But a strange paralysis held him back. The plant was like a living and sentient thing – a thing that watched him, that dominated him with its unclean but superior will. And the huge blossom, as he stared, took on the dim, unnatural semblance of a face. It was somehow like the face of Falmer, but the lineaments were twisted all awry, and were mingled with those of something wholly devilish and nonhuman. Thone could not move – he could not take his eyes from the blasphemous abnormality.

By some miracle, his fever had left him; and it did not return. Instead, there came an eternity of frozen fright and madness in which he sat facing the mesmeric plant. It towered before him from the dry, dead shell that had been Falmer, its swollen, gluttoned stems and branches swaying gently, its huge flower leering perpetually upon him with its impious travesty of a human face. He thought that he heard a low, singing sound, ineffably sweet, but whether it emanated from the plant or was a mere hallucination of his overwrought senses, he could not know.

The sluggish hours went by, and a gruelling sun poured down its beams like molten lead from some titanic vessel of torture. His head swam with

weakness and the fetor-laden heat, but he could not relax the rigor of his posture. There was no change in the nodding monstrosity, which seemed to have attained its full growth above the head of its victim. But after a long interim Thone's eyes were drawn to the shrunken hands of Falmer, which still clasped the drawn-up knees in a spasmodic clutch. Through the ends of the fingers, tiny white rootlets had broken and were writhing slowly in the air, groping, it seemed, for a new source of nourishment. Then from the neck and chin, other tips were breaking, and over the whole body the clothing stirred in a curious manner, as if with the crawling and lifting of hidden lizards.

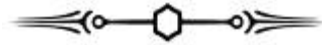
At the same time the singing grew louder, sweeter, more imperious, and the swaying of the great plant assumed an indescribably seductive tempo. It was like the allurements of voluptuous sirens, the deadly languor of dancing cobras. Thone felt an irresistible compulsion: a summons was being laid upon him, and his drugged mind and body must obey it. The very fingers of Falmer, twisting viperishly, seemed beckoning to him. Suddenly he was on his hands and knees in the bottom of the boat. Inch by inch, with terror and fascination contending in his brain, he crept forward, dragging himself over the disregarded bundle of orchid-plants, inch by inch, foot by foot, till his head was against the withered hands of Falmer, from which hung and floated the questing roots.

Some cataleptic spell had made him helpless. He felt the rootlets as they moved like delving fingers through his hair and over his face and neck, and started to strike in with agonizing, needle-sharp tips. He could not stir, he could not even close his lids. In a frozen stare, he saw the gold and carmine flash of a hovering butterfly as the roots began to pierce his pupils.

Deeper and deeper went the greedy roots, while new filaments grew out to enmesh him like a witch's net... For a while, it seemed that the dead and

the living writhed together in leashed convulsions... At last Thone hung supine amid the lethal, ever-growing web; bloated and colossal, the plant lived on; and in its upper branches, through the still, stifling afternoon, a second flower began to unfold.

Seedling of Mars



IT WAS IN the fall of 1947, three days prior to the annual football game between Stanford and the University of California, that the strange visitor from outer space landed in the middle of the huge stadium at Berkeley where the game was to be held.

Descending with peculiar deliberation, it was seen and pointed out by multitudes of people in the towns that border on San Francisco Bay, in Berkeley, Oakland, Alameda, and San Francisco itself. Gleaming with a fiery, copperish-golden light, it floated down from the cloudless autumn azure, dropping in a sort of slow spiral above the stadium. It was utterly unlike any known type of aircraft, and was nearly a hundred feet in length.

The general shape was ovoid, and also more or less angular, with a surface divided into scores of variant planes, and with many diamond ports of purplish material different from that of which the body was constructed. Even at first glance, it suggested the inventive genius and workmanship of some alien world, of a people whose ideas of mechanical symmetry have been conditioned by evolutionary necessities and sense-faculties divergent from ours.

However, when the queer vessel had come to rest in the amphitheater, many conflicting theories regarding its origin and the purpose of its descent were promulgated in the Bay cities. There were those who feared the invasion of some foreign foe, and who thought that the odd ship was the harbinger of a long-plotted attack from the Russian and Chinese Soviets, or even from Germany, whose intentions were still suspected. And many of

those who postulated an ultra-planetary origin were also apprehensive, deeming that the visitant was perhaps hostile, and might mark the beginning of some terrible incursion from outer worlds.

In the meanwhile, utterly silent and immobile and without sign of life or occupancy, the vessel reposed in the stadium, where staring crowds began to gather about it. These crowds, however, were soon dispersed by order of the civic authorities, since the nature and intentions of the stranger were alike doubtful and undeclared. The stadium was closed to the public; and, in case of inimical manifestations, machine-guns were mounted on the higher seats with a company of Marines in attendance, and bombing-planes hovered in readiness to drop their lethal freight on the shining, coppery bulk.

The intense interest was felt by the whole scientific fraternity, and a large group of professors, of chemists, metallurgists, astronomers, astrophysicists and biologists was organized to visit and examine the unknown object. When, on the afternoon following its landing, the local observatories issued a bulletin saying that the vessel had been sighted approaching the earth from translunar space on the previous night, the fact of its nonterrestrial genesis became established beyond dispute in the eyes of most; and controversy reigned as to whether it had come from Venus, Mars, Mercury, or one of the superior planets; or whether, perhaps, it was a wanderer from another solar system than our own.

But of course the nearer planets were favored in this dispute by the majority, especially Mars; for, as nearly as those who had watched it could determine, the line of the vessel's approach would have formed a trajectory with the red planet.

All that day, while argument seethed, while extras with luridly speculative and fantastic headlines were issued by the local papers as well

as by the press of the whole civilized world; while public sentiment was divided between apprehension and curiosity, and the guarding Marines and aviators continued to watch for signs of possible hostility, the unidentified vessel maintained its initial stillness and silence.

Telescopes and glasses were trained upon it from the hills above the stadium; but even these disclosed little regarding its character. Those who studied it saw that the numerous ports were made of a vitreous material, more or less transparent; but nothing stirred behind them; and the glimpses of queer machinery which they afforded in the ship's interior were meaningless to the watchers. One port, larger than the rest, was believed to be a sort of door or man-hole; but no one came to open it; and behind it was a weird array of motionless rods and coils and pistons, which debarred the vision from further view.

Doubtless, it was thought, the occupants were no less cautious of their alien milieu than the people of the Bay region were suspicious of the vessel. Perhaps they feared to reveal themselves to human eyes; perhaps they were doubtful of the terrene atmosphere and its effect upon themselves; or perhaps they were merely lying in wait and planning some devilish outburst with unconceived weapons or engineering of destruction.

Apart from the fears felt by some, and the wonderment and speculation of others, a third division of public sentiment soon began to crystallize. In collegiate circles and among sport-lovers, the feeling was that the strange vessel had taken an unwarrantable liberty in pre-empting the stadium, especially at a time so near to the forthcoming athletic event. A petition for its removal was circulated, and presented to the city authorities. The great metallic hull, it was felt, no matter whence it had come or why, should not be allowed to interfere with anything so sacrosanct and of such prime importance as a football game.

However, in spite of the turmoil it had created, the vessel refused to move by so much as the fraction of an inch. Many began to surmise that the occupants had been overcome by the conditions of their transit through space; or perhaps they had died, unable to endure the gravity and atmospheric pressure of the earth.

It was decided to leave the vessel unapproached until morning of the next day, when the committee of investigation would visit it. During that afternoon and night, scientists from many states were speeding toward California by airplane and rocketship, to be on hand in time for this event.

It was felt advisable to limit the number of this committee. Among the fortunate savants who had been selected, was John Gaillard, assistant astronomer at the Mt. Wilson observatory. Gaillard represented the more radical and freely speculative trend of scientific thought, and had become well known for his theories concerning the inhabitability of the inferior planets, particularly Mars and Venus. He had long championed the idea of intelligent and highly organized life on these worlds, and had even published more than one treatise dealing with the subject, in which he had elaborated his theories with much specific detail. His excitement at the news of the strange vessel was intense. He was one of those who had sighted the gleaming and unclassifiable speck far out in space, beyond the orbit of the moon, in the late hours of the previous night; and he had felt even then a premonition of its true character. Others of the party were free and open-minded in their attitude; but no one was more deeply and vitally interested than Gaillard.

Godfrey Stilton, professor of astronomy at the University of California, also on the committee, might have been chosen as the very antithesis of Gaillard in his views and tendencies. Narrow, dogmatic, skeptical of all that could not be proved by line and rule, scornful of all that lay beyond the

bourne of a strait empiricism, he was loath to admit the ultra-terrene origin of the vessel, or even the possibility of organic life on any other world than the earth. Several of his confreres belonged to the same intellectual type.

Apart from these two men and their fellow-scientists, the party included three newspaper reporters, as well as the local chief of police, William Polson, and the Mayor of Berkeley, James Gresham, since it was felt that the forces of government should be represented. The entire committee comprised forty men; and a number of expert machinists, equipped with acetylene torches and cutting tools, were held in reserve outside the stadium, in case it should be found necessary to open the vessel by force.

At nine a.m. the investigators entered the stadium and approached the glittering multi-angled object. Many were conscious of the thrill that attends some unforeknowable danger; but more were animated by the keenest curiosity and by feelings of extreme wonderment. Gaillard, in especial, felt himself in the presence of ultramundane mystery and marvelled as he neared the coppery-golden bulk: his feeling amounted almost to an actual vertigo, such as would be experienced by one who gazes athwart unfathomable gulfs upon the arcanic secrets and the wit-transcending wonders of a foreign sphere. It seemed to him that he stood upon the verge between the determinate and the incommensurable, betwixt the finite and the infinite.

Others of the group, in lesser degree, were possessed by similar emotions. And even the hard-headed, unimaginative Stilton was disturbed by a queer uneasiness; which, being minded as he was, he assigned to the weather — or a “touch of liver.”

The strange ship reposed in utter stillness, as before. The fears of those who half-expected some deadly ambush were allayed as they drew near; and the hopes of those who looked for a more amicable manifestation of

living occupancy were ungratified. The party gathered before the main port, which, like all the others, was made in the form of a great diamond. It was several feet above their heads, in a vertical angle or plane of the hull; and they stood staring through its mauve transparency on the unknown, intricate mechanisms beyond, that were colored as if by the rich panes of some cathedral window.

All were in doubt as to what should be done; for it seemed evident that the occupants of the vessel, if alive and conscious, were in no hurry to reveal themselves to human scrutiny. The delegation resolved to wait a few minutes before calling on the services of the assembled mechanics and their acetylene torches; and while waiting they walked about and inspected the metal of the walls, which seemed to be an alloy of copper and red gold; tempered to a preternatural hardness by some process unfamiliar to telluric metallurgy. There was no sign of jointure in the myriad planes and facets; and the whole enormous shell, apart from its lucid ports, might well have been wrought from a single sheet of the rich alloy.

Gaillard stood peering upward at the main port, while his companions sauntered about the vessel talking and debating among themselves. Somehow, he felt an intuition that something strange and miraculous was about to happen; and when the great port began to open slowly, without visible agency, dividing into two valves that slid away at the sides, the thrill which he experienced was not altogether one of surprise. Nor was he surprised when a sort of metal escalator, consisting of narrow stairs that were little more than rungs, descended step by step from the opening and came down to the ground at his very feet.

The port had opened and the escalator had unfolded in silence, with no faintest creak or clang; but others beside Gaillard had perceived the

occurrence, and all hastened in great excitement and gathered before the steps.

Contrary to their not unnatural expectations, no one emerged from the vessel; and they could see little more of the interior than had been visible through the shut valves. They looked for some exotic ambassador from Mars, some gorgeous and bizarre plenipotentiary from Venus to descend the queer steps; and the silence and solitude and mechanical adroitness of it all were uncanny. It seemed that the great ship was a living entity, and possessed a brain and nerves of its own, hidden in the metal-sheathed interior.

The open portal and stairs offered an obvious invitation; and after some hesitancy, the scientists made up their minds to enter. Some were still fearful of a trap; and five of the forty men warily decided to remain without; but all the others were more power-fully drawn by curiosity and investigative ardor; and one by one they climbed the stairs and filed into the vessel.

They found the interior even more provocative of wonder than the outer walls had been. It was quite roomy and was divided into several compartments of ample size, two of which, at the vessel's center, were lined with low couches covered by soft, lustrous, piliated fabrics of opalescent grey. The others, as well as the ante-chamber behind the entrance, were filled with machinery whose motive force and method of operation were alike obscure to the most expert among the investigators.

Rare metals and odd alloys, some of them difficult to classify, had been used in the construction of this machinery. Near the entrance there was a sort of tripodal table or instrument-board whose queer rows of levers and buttons were no less mysterious than the ciphers of some telic cryptogram.

The entire ship was seemingly deserted, with no trace of human or extra-planetary life.

Wandering through the apartments and marvelling at the unsolved mechanical enigmas which surrounded them, the delegation-members were not aware that the broad valves of the main port had closed behind them with the same stealthiness and silence that had marked their opening. Nor did they hear the warning shouts of the five men who had remained outside.

Their first intimation of anything untoward came from a sudden lurching and lifting of the vessel. Startled, they looked at the window-like ports, and saw through the violet, vitreous panes the whirling and falling away of those innumerable rows of seats which ringed the immense stadium. The alien space-ship, with no visible hand to control it, was rising rapidly in air with a sort of spiral movement. It was bearing away to some unknown world the entire delegation of hardy scientists that had boarded it, together with the Berkeley Mayor and Chief of Police and the three privileged reporters who had thought to obtain an ultrasensational “scoop” for their respective journals!

The situation was wholly without precedent, and was more than astounding; and the reactions of the various men, though quite divergent in some ways, were all marked by amazement and Consternation. Many were too stunned and confounded to realize all the implications or possibilities, others were frankly terrified; and others still were indignant.

“This is an outrage!” thundered Stilton, as soon as he had recovered a little from his primary surprise. There were similar exclamations from others of the same temperament as he, all of whom felt emphatically that something should be done about the situation, and that someone (who, unfortunately, they could not locate or identify) should be made to suffer for such unparalleled audacity.

Gaillard, though he shared in the general amazement, was thrilled to the bottom of his heart by a sense of unearthly and prodigious adventure, by a premonition of interplanetary enterprise. He felt a mystic certainty that he and the others had embarked on a voyage to some world untrodden heretofore by man; that the Strange vessel had descended to earth and had opened its port to invite them for this very purpose; that an esoteric and remote power was guiding its every movement and was drawing it to an appointed destination. Vast, inchoate images of unbounded space and splendor and interstellar strangeness filled his mind, and unforelimnable pictures rose to dazzle his vision from an ultratelluric bourn.

In some incomprehensible way, he knew that his life-long desire to penetrate the mysteries of distant spheres would soon be gratified; and he (if not his companions) was resigned from the very first to that bizarre abduction and captivity in the soaring space flier.

Discussing their position with much volubility and vociferousness, the assembled savants rushed to the various ports and stared down at the world they were leaving. In a mere fraction of time, they had risen to a cloud-like altitude. The whole region about San Francisco Bay, as well as the verges of the Pacific ocean, lay stretched below them like an immense relief map; and they could already see the curvature of the horizon, which seemed to reel and dip as they went upward.

It was an awesome and magnificent prospect; but the growing acceleration of the vessel, which had now gained a speed more than equal to that of the rocket-ships which were used at that time for circling the globe in the stratosphere, soon compelled them to relinquish their standing position and seek the refuge of the convenient couches. Conversation also was abandoned, for everyone began to experience an almost intolerable

constriction and oppression, which held their bodies as if with clamps of unyielding metal.

However, when they had all laid themselves on the piled couches, they felt a mysterious relief, whose source they could not ascertain. It seemed that a force emanated from those couches, which alleviated in some way the leaden stress of increased gravity due to the acceleration, and made it possible for the men to endure the terrific speed with which the space-flier was leaving the earth's atmosphere and gravitational zone.

Presently they found themselves able to stand up and walk around once more. Their sensations, on the whole, were almost normal; though, in contra-distinction to the initial crushing weight, there was now an odd lightness which compelled them to shorten their steps to avoid colliding with the walls and machinery. Their weight was less than it would have been on earth, but the loss was not enough to produce discomfort or sickness, and was accompanied by a sort of exhilaration.

They perceived that they were breathing a thin, rarefied and bracing air, not dissimilar to that of terrene mountain-tops, though permeated by one or two unfamiliar elements that gave it a touch of nitric sharpness. This air tended to increase the exhilaration and to quicken their respiration and pulses a little.

"This is damnable!" spluttered the indignant Stilton, as soon as he found that the powers of locomotion and breathing were reasonably subject to control. "It is contrary to all law, decency and order. The U. S. Government should do something about it immediately."

"I fear" observed Gaillard, "That we are now beyond the jurisdiction of the U. S., as well as that of all other mundane governments. No plane or rocket-ship could reach the air-strata through which we are passing; and we will penetrate the interstellar ether in a moment or so. Presumably this

vessel is returning to the world from which it came; and we are going with it.”

“Absurd! preposterous! outrageous!” Stilton’s voice was a roar, slightly subdued and attenuated by the fine atmospheric medium. “I’ve always maintained that space-travel was utterly chimerical. Even earth-scientists haven’t been able to invent a space-ship; and it is ridiculous to assume that highly intelligent life, capable of such invention, could exist on other planets.”

“How, then,” queried Gaillard, “do you account for our situation?”

“The vessel is of human origin, of course. It must be a new and ultra-powerful type of rocket-ship, devised by the Soviets, and under automatic or radio control, which will probably land us in Siberia after travelling in the highest layers of the stratosphere.”

Gaillard, smiling with gentle irony, felt that he could safely abandon the argument. Leaving Stilton to stare wrathfully through a port at the receding bulk of the world, on which the whole of North America, together with Alaska and the Hawaiian Islands, had begun to declare their coastal outlines, he joined others of the party in a renewed investigation of the ship.

Some still maintained that living beings must be hidden on board; but a close search of every apartment, corner and cranny resulted as before. Abandoning this objective, the men began to re-examine the machinery, whose motive-power and method of operation they were still unable to fathom. Utterly perplexed and mystified, they watched the instrument-board, on which certain of the keys would move occasionally, as if shifted by an unseen hand. These changes of alignment were always followed by some change in the vessel’s speed, or by a slight alteration of its course, possibly to avoid collision with meteoric fragments.

Though nothing definite could be learned about the propelling mechanism, certain negative facts were soon established. The method of propulsion was plainly non-explosive, for there were no roaring and flaming discharge of rockets. All was silent, gliding, and vibrationless, with nothing to betoken mechanical activity, other than the shifting of the keys and the glowing of certain intricate coils and pistons with a strange blue light. This light, cold as the scintillation of Arctic ice, was not electric in its nature, but suggested rather some unknown form of radio-activity.

After awhile, Stilton joined those who were grouped about the instrument-board. Still muttering his resentment of the unlawful and unscientific indignity to which he had been subjected, he watched the keys for a minute or so, and then, seizing one of them with his fingers, he tried to experiment, with the idea of gaining control of the vessel's movements.

To his amazement and that of his confreres, the key was immovable. Stilton strained till the blue veins stood out on his hand and sweat poured in rills from his baldish brow. Then, one by one, he tried others of the keys, tugging desperately, but always with the same result. Evidently the board was locked against other control than that of the unknown pilot.

Still persisting in his endeavor, Stilton came to a key of large size and different shape from the rest. Touching it, he screamed in agony, and withdrew his fingers from the strange object with some difficulty. The key was cold, as if it had been steeped in the absolute zero of space. It had actually seemed to sear his fingers with its extreme iciness. After that, he desisted, and made no further effort to interfere with the workings of the vessel.

Gaillard, after watching this interlude, had wandered back to one of the main apartments. Peering out once more from his set on a couch of supernal softness and resilience, he beheld a breathtaking spectacle. The whole

world, a great, glowing, many-tinted globe, was swimming abreast of the flier in the black and starlined gulf. The awfulness of the undirectioned deeps, the unthinkable isolation of infinitude rushed upon him, and he felt sick and giddy for a few instants with the shock of realization, and was swept by an overwhelming panic, limitless and without name.

Then, strangely, the terror passed, in a dawning exultation at the prospect of the novel voyage through unsounded heavens and toward untrodden shores. Oblivious of danger, forgetful of the dread alienation from man's accustomed environment, he gave himself up to magical conviction of marvellous adventure and unique destiny to come.

Others, however, were less capable of orientating themselves to these bizarre and terrific circumstances. Pale and horror-stricken, with a sense of irredeemable loss, of all-encompassing peril and giddy confusion, they watched the receding earth from whose comfortable purlieus they had been removed so inexplicably and with such awful suddenness.

Many were speechless with fear, as they realized more clearly their impotence in the grip of an all-powerful and incognizable force.

Some chattered loudly and incoherently, in an effort to conceal their perturbation. The three reporters lamented their inability to communicate with the journals they represented. James Gresham, the Mayor, and William Polson, the Chief of Police, were non-plussed and altogether at a loss as to what to do or think, in circumstances that seemed to nullify completely their wonted civic importance. And the scientists, as might have been expected, were divided into two main camps. The more radical and adventurous were more or less prone to welcome whatever might be in store for the sake of new knowledge; while the others accepted their fate with varying degrees of reluctance, of protest and apprehension.

Several hours went by; and the moon, a ball of dazzling desolation in the great abyss, had been left behind with the waning earth. The flier was speeding alone through the cosmic vastness, in a universe whose grandeur was a revelation even to the astronomers, familiar as they were with the magnitudes and multitudes of suns, nebulae and galaxies. The thirty-five men were being estranged from their natal planet and hurled across unthinkable immensity at a speed far beyond that of any solar body or satellite. It was hard to estimate the precise velocity; but some idea of it could be gained from the rapidity with which the sun and the nearer planets, Mars, Mercury and Venus, changed their relative positions. They seemed almost to fly athwart the heavens like so many jugglers' balls.

It was plain that some sort of artificial gravity prevailed in the ship; for the weightlessness that would otherwise have been inevitable in outer space was not experienced at any time. Also, the scientists found that they were being supplied with air from certain oddly-shapen tanks. Evidently, too, there was some kind of hidden heating-system or mode of insulation against the interspatial zero; for the temperature of the vessel's interior remained constant, at about 65° or 70°.

Looking at their watches, some of the party found that it was now noon by terrestrial time; though even the most unimaginative were impressed by the absurdity of the twenty-four hour division of day and night amid the eternal sunlight of the void.

Many began to feel hungry and thirsty, and to voice their appetite aloud. Not long after, as if in response, like the service given by a good table d'hôte, or restaurant, certain panels in the inner metal wall, hitherto unnoticed by the savants, opened noiselessly before their eyes and revealed a series of long buffets, on which were curious wide-mouthed ewers

containing water and deep, tureen-like plates filled to the rim with unknown food-stuffs.

Too astonished to comment at much length on this new miracle, the delegation-members proceeded to sample the viands and beverage thus offered. Stilton, still morosely indignant, refused to taste them but was alone in his abstention.

The water was quite drinkable, though slightly alkaline, as if it had come from desert wells; and the food, a sort of reddish paste, concerning whose nature and composition the chemists were doubtful, served to appease the pangs of hunger even if it was not especially seductive to the palate.

After the earth-men had partaken of this reflection, the panels closed as silently and unobtrusively as they had opened. The vessel plunged on through space, hour after hour, till it became obvious to Gaillard and his fellow-astronomers that it was either heading directly for the planet Mars or would pass very close to Mars on its way to some further orb.

The red world, with its familiar markings, which they had watched so often through observatory telescopes, and over whose character and causation they had long puzzled, began to loom before them and swelled upon the heavens with thaumaturgic swiftness. They then perceived a signal deceleration in the speed of the flier, which continued straight on toward the coppery planet, as if its goal were concealed amid the labyrinth of obscure and singular mottlings; and it became impossible to doubt any longer that Mars was their destination.

Gaillard, and those who were more or less akin to him in their interests and proclivities, were stirred by an awesome and sublime expectancy as the vessel neared the alien world. Then it began to float gently down above an exotic landscape in which the well-known “seas” and “canals”, enormous with their closeness, could plainly be recognized.

Soon they approached the surface of the ruddy planet, spiraling through its cloudless and mistless atmosphere, while the deceleration slowed to a speed that was little more than that of a falling parachute. Mars surrounded them with its strait, monotonous horizons, nearer than those of earth, and displaying neither mountains nor any salient elevation of hills or hummocks; and soon they hung above it at an altitude of a half-mile or less. Here the vessel seemed to halt and poise, without descending further.

Below them now they saw a desert of low-ridge and yellowish-red sand, intersected by one of the so-called “canals”, which ran sinuously away on either side to disappear beyond the horizon.

The scientists studied this terrain in ever-growing amazement and excitement, as the true nature of the veining “canal” was forced upon their perception. It was not water, as many had heretofore presumed, but a mass of pale-green vegetation, of vast and serrate leaves or fronds, all of which seemed to emanate from a single crawling flesh-colored stalk, several hundred feet in diameter and with swollen nodular joints at half-mile intervals! Aside from this anomalous and super-gigantic vine, there was no trace of life, either animal or vegetable, in the whole landscape; and the extent of the crawling stalk, which netted the entire visible terrain but seemed by its form and characteristics to be the mere tendril of some vaster growth, was a thing to stagger the preconceptions of mundane botany.

Many of the scientists were almost stupefied with astonishment as they gazed down from the violet ports on this titanic creeper. More than ever, the journalists mourned the staggering headlines with which they would be unable, under existing circumstances, to endow their respective dailies. Gresham and Poison felt that there was something vaguely illegal about the existence of anything so monstrous in the way of a plant-form; and the

scientific disapproval felt by Stilton and his academically minded confreres was most pronounced.

“Outrageous! unheard-of! ludicrous!” muttered Stilton. “This thing defies the most elementary laws of botany. There is no conceivable precedent for it.”

Gaillard, who stood beside him, was so wrapt in his contemplation of the novel growth, that he scarcely heard Stilton’s comment. The conviction of vast and sublime adventure which had grown upon him ever since the beginning of that bizarre, stupendous voyage, was now confirmed by a clear daylight certitude. He could give no definite form or coherence to the feeling that possessed him; but he was overwhelmed by the intimation of present marvel and future miracle, and the intuition of strange, tremendous revelations to come.

Few of the party cared to speak, or would have been capable of speech. All that had happened to them during the past few hours, and all on which they now gazed, was so far beyond the scope of human action and cognition, that the normal exercise of their faculties was more or less inhibited by the struggle for adjustment to these unique conditions.

After they had watched the gargantuan vine for a minute or two, the savants became aware that the vessel was moving again, this time in a lateral direction. Flying very slowly and deliberately, it followed the course of the creeper toward what seemed to be the west of Mars, above which a small and pallid sun was descending through the dingy, burnt-out sky and casting a thin, chilly light athwart the desolate land.

The men were overpoweringly conscious of an intelligent determination behind all that was occurring; and the sense of this remote, unknowable supervision and control was stronger in Gaillard even than in the others. No one could doubt that every movement of the vessel was timed and

predestined; and Gaillard felt that the slowness with which it followed the progress of the great stalk was calculated to give the scientific delegation ample opportunity for the study of their new environment; and, in particular, for observation of the growth itself.

In vain, however, did they watch their shifting milieu for aught that could denote the presence of organic forms of a human, nonhuman or preter-human type, such as might imaginably exist on Mars. Of course, only such entities, it was thought, could have built, despatched, and guided the vessel in which they were held captive.

The flier went on for at least an hour, traversing an immense territory in which, after many miles, the initial sandy desolation yielded place to a sort of swamp. Here, where sluggish waters webbed and marly soil, the winding creeper swelled to incredible proportions, with lush leaves that embowered the marshy ground for almost a mile on either side of the overlooming stalk.

Here, too, the foliage assumed a richer and more vivid greenness, fraught with sublime vital exuberance; and the stem itself displayed an indescribable succulence, together with a shining and glossy luster, a bloom that was weirdly and incongruously suggestive of well-nourished flesh. The thing seemed to palpitate at regular and rhythmic intervals beneath the eyes of the observers, like a living entity; and in places there were queerly shaped nodes or attachments on the stem, whose purpose no one could imagine.

Gaillard called the attention of Stilton to the strange throbbing that was noticeable in the plant; a throbbing which seemed to communicate itself even to the hundred-foot leaves, so that they trembled like plumes.

“Humph!” said Stilton, shaking his head with an air of mingled disbelief and disgust. “That palpitation is altogether impossible. There must be something wrong with our eyes — some disturbance of focus brought on by

the velocity of our voyage, perhaps. Either that, or there is some peculiar refractive quality in the atmosphere, which gives the appearance of movement to stable objects.”

Gaillard refrained from calling his attention to the fact that this imputed phenomenon of visual disorder or aerial refraction was confined in its application entirely to the plant and did not extend its range to the bordering landscape.

Soon after this, the vessel came to an enormous branching of the plant; and the earth-men discovered that the stalk they had been following was merely one of three that ramified from a vaster stem to intersect the boggy soil at widely divergent angles and vanish athwart opposing horizons. The junction was marked by a mountainous double node that bore a bizarre likeness to human hips. Here the throbbing was stronger and more perceptible than ever; and odd veinings and mottlings of a reddish color were visible on the pale surface of the stem.

The savants became more and more excited by the unexampled magnitude and singular characteristics of this remarkable growth. But revelations of a still more extraordinary nature were in store. After poising a moment above the monstrous joint, the vessel flew on at a higher elevation with increased speed, along the main stem, which extended for an incalculable distance into the occident of Mars. It revealed fresh ramifications at variable intervals, and growing ever larger and more luxuriant as it penetrated marshy regions which were doubtless the residual ooze of a sunken sea.

“My God! the thing must surround the entire planet,” said one of the reporters in an awed voice.

“It looks that way,” Gaillard assented gravely. “We must be travelling almost in a line with the equator; and we have already followed the plant for

hundreds of miles. From what we have seen, it would seem that the Martian ‘canals’ are merely its branchings; and perhaps the areas mapped as ‘seas’ by astronomers are masses of its foliage.”

“I can’t understand it,” grumbled Stilton. “The dammed thing is utterly contrary to science, and against nature — it oughtn’t to exist in any rational or conceivable cosmos.

“Well,” said Gaillard, a little tartly, “it does exist; and I don’t see how you are going to get away from it. Apparently, too, it is the only vegetable form on the planet; at least, so far, we have failed to find anything else of the sort. After all, why shouldn’t the floral life of Mars be concentrated in a single type? And why shouldn’t there be just one example of that type? It shows a marvellous economy on the part of nature. There is no reason at all for assuming that the vegetable or even the animal kingdoms on other worlds would exhibit the same fission and multiplicity that are shown on earth.”

Stilton, as he listened to this unorthodox argument, glared at Gaillard like a Mohammedan at some errant infidel, but was either too angry or too disgusted for further speech.

The attention of the scientists was now drawn to a greenish area along the line of their flight, covering many square miles. Here, they saw that the main stem had put out a multitude of tendrils, whose foliage hid the underlying soil like a thick forest. Even as Gaillard had postulated, the origin of the sea-like areas on Mars was now explained.

Forty or fifty miles beyond this mass of foliation, they came to another that was even more extensive. The vessel soared to a great height, and they looked down on the realm-wide expanse of leafage. In its middle they discerned a circular node, leagues in extent, and rising like a rounded alp, from which emanated in all directions the planet-circling stems of the weird

growth. Not only the size, but also certain features of the immense node, were provocative of utter dumbfoundment in the beholders. It was like the head of some gargantuan cuttle-fish, and the stalks that ran away on all sides were suggestive of tentacles. And, strangest of all, the men descried in the center of the head two enormous masses, clear and lucent like water, which combined the size of lakes with the form and appearance of optic organs!

The whole plant palpitated like a breathing bosom; and the awe with which the involuntary explorers surveyed it was incommunicable by human words. All were compelled to recognize that ever aside from its unparalleled proportions and habit of growth, the thing was in no sense alliable with any mundane botanic genera. And to Gaillard, as well as to others, the thought occurred that it was a sentient organism, and that the throbbing mass on which they now gazed was the brain or central ganglion of its unknown nervous system.

The vast eyes, holding the sunlight like colossal dew-drops, seemed to return their scrutiny with an unreadable and superhuman intelligence: and Gaillard was obsessed by the feeling that preternatural knowledge and wisdom bordering upon omniscience were hidden in those hyaline depths.

The vessel began to descend, and settled vertically down in a sort of valley close to the mountainous head, where the foliation of two departing stems had left a patch of clear land. It was like a forest glade, with impenetrable woods on three sides, and a high crag on the fourth. Here, for the first time during the experience of its occupants, the flier came to rest on the soil of Mars; floating gently down without jar or vibration; and almost immediately after its landing, the valves of the main port unfolded, and the metal stairway descended to the ground, in obvious readiness to disembark the human passengers.

One by one, some with caution and timidity, others with adventuresome eagerness, the men filed out of the vessel and started to inspect their surroundings. They found that the Martian air differed little if at all from that which they had been breathing in the space-flier; and at that hour, with the sun still pouring into the strange valley from the west, the temperature was moderately warm.

It was an outré and fantastic scene; and the details were unlike those of any tellurian landscape. Underfoot was a soft, resilient soil, like a moist loess, wholly devoid of grass, lichens, fungi or any minor plant-forms. The foliage of the mammoth vine, with horizontal fronds of a baroque type, feathery and voluminous, hung about the glade to an altitudinous height like that of ancient evergreens, and quivered in the windless air with the pulsation of the stems.

Close at hand there rose the vast, flesh-colored wall of the central plant-head, which sloped upward like a hill toward the hidden eyes and was no doubt deeply embedded and rooted in the Martian soil. Stepping close to the living mass, the earthmen saw that its surface was netted with millions of wrinkle-like reticulations, and was filled with great pores resembling those of animal skin beneath some extra-powerful microscope. They conducted their inspection in an awe-struck silence; and for some time no one felt able to voice the extraordinary conclusions to which most of them had now been driven.

The emotions of Gaillard were almost religious as he contemplated the scarce-imaginable amplitude of this ultra-terrene life-form, which seemed to him to exhibit attributes nearer to those of divinity than he had found in any other manifestation of the vital principle.

In it, he saw the combined apotheosis of the animal and the vegetable. The thing was so perfect and complete and all-sufficing, so independent of

lesser life in its world-enmeshing growth. It poured forth the sense of aeonian longevity, perhaps of immortality. And to what arcanic and cosmic consciousness might it not have attained during the cycles of its development! What super-normal senses and faculties might it not possess! What powers and potentialities beyond the achievement of more limited, more finite forms! In a lesser degree, many of his companions were aware of similar feeling. Almost, in the presence of this portentous and sublime anomaly, they forgot the unsolved enigma of the space-vessel and their voyage across the heretofore unbridged immensities. But Stilton and his brother-conservatives were highly scandalized by the inexplicable nature of it all; and if they had been religiously minded, they would have expressed their sense of violation and outrage by saying that the monstrous plant, as well as the unexampled events in which they had taken an unwilling part, were tainted with the most grievous heresy and flagrant blasphemy. Gresham, who had been eyeing his surroundings with a pompous and puzzled solemnity, was the first to break the silence.

“I wonder where the local Government hangs out?” he queried. “Who the hell is in power here anyway? Hey, Mr. Gaillard, you astronomers know a lot about Mars. Ain’t there a U. S. Consulate somewhere in this god-forsaken hole?”

Gaillard was compelled to inform him that there was no consular service on Mars, and also that the form of government on that planet, as well as its official location, was still an open problem.

“However,” he went on, “I shouldn’t be surprised to learn that we are now in the presence of the sole and supreme ruler of the Martian realms.”

“Huh! I don’t see anyone,” grunted Gresham with a troubled frown, as he surveyed the quivering masses of foliage and the alp-like head of the

great plant. The import of Gaillard's observation was too far beyond his intellectual orbit.

Gaillard had been inspecting the flesh-tinted wall of the head with supreme and fascinated interest. At some distance, to one side, he perceived certain peculiar outgrowths, either shrunken or vestigial, like drooping and flaccid horns. They were large as a man's body, and might at some time have been much larger. It seemed as if the plant had put them forth for some unknown purpose, and had allowed them to wither when the purpose had been accomplished. They still retained an uncanny suggestion of semi-human parts and members, of strange appendages, half arms and half tentacles, as if they had been modelled from some exemplar of undiscovered Martian animal life.

Just below them, on the ground, Gaillard noticed a litter of queer metallic tools, with rough sheets and formless ingots of the same coppery material from which the space-flier had been constructed.

Somehow, the spot suggested an abandoned ship-yard; though there were no scaffoldings such as would ordinarily be used in the building of a vessel. An odd inkling of the truth arose in Gaillard's mind as he surveyed the metal remnants, but he was too thoroughly bemused and overawed by the wonder of all that had occurred, as well as by all he had ascertained or surmised, to communicate his inferences to the other savants.

In the meanwhile the entire party had wandered about the glade, which comprised an area of several hundred yards. One of the astronomers, Philip Colton, who had made a side-line of botany, was examining the serried foliage of the super-gigantic creepers with a mingling of utmost interest and perplexity. The fronds or branches were lined with pinnate needles covered by a long, silk pubescence; and each of these needles was four feet in length by three or four inches in thickness, possibly with a hollow and tubular

structure. The fronds grew in level array from the main creeper, filling the air like a horizontal forest, and reaching to the very ground in close, imbricated order.

Colton took a jack-knife from his pocket and tried to cut a section from one of the pinnate leaves. At the first touch of the keen blade, the whole frond recoiled violently beyond his reach; and then swinging back, it dealt him a tremendous blow which stretched him on the ground and hurled the knife from his fingers to a considerable distance.

If it had not been for the lesser gravity of Mars, he would have been severely injured by the fall. As it was, he lay bruised and breathless, staring with ludicrous surprise at the great frond, which had resumed its former position among its fellows, and now displayed no other movement than the singular trembling due to the rhythmic palpitation of the stem to which it was attached.

Colton's discomfiture had been noticed by his confreres; and all at once, as if their tongues had been loosed by this happening, a babel of discussion arose among them. It was no longer possible for anyone to doubt the animate or half-animate nature of the growth; and even the outraged and ireful Stilton, who considered that the most sacred laws of scientific probity were being violated, was driven to concede the presence of a biologic riddle not to be explained in terms of orthodox morphology.

Gaillard, who did not care to take any great part in this discussion, preferring his own thoughts and conjectures, continued to watch the throbbing growth. He stood a little apart from the others, and nearer than they to the fleshy and multiporous slope of the huge head; and all at once, as he watched, he saw the sprouting of what appeared to be a new tendril from the surface, at a distance of about four feet above the ground.

The thing grew like something in a slow moving-picture, lengthening out and swelling visibly, with a bulbous knob at the end. This knob soon became a large, faintly convoluted mass, whose outlines puzzled and tantalized Gaillard with their intimation of something he had once seen but could not now remember. There was a bizarre hint of nascent limbs and members, which soon become more definite; and then, with a sort of shock, he saw that the thing resembled a human foetus!

His involuntary exclamation of amazement drew others; and soon the whole delegation was grouped about him, watching the incredible development of the new growth with bated breath. The thing had put forth two well-formed legs, which now rested on the ground, supporting with their five-toed feet the upright body, on which the human head and arms were fully evolved, though they had not yet attained adult size.

The process continued; and simultaneously, a sort of woolly floss began to appear around the trunk, arms and legs, like the rapid spinning of some enormous cocoon. The hands and neck were bare; but the feet were covered with a different material, which took on the appearance of green leather. When the floss thickened and darkened to an iron-grey, and assumed quite modish outlines, it became obvious that the figure was being clothed in garments such as were worn by the earth-men, probably in deference to human ideas of modesty.

The thing was unbelievable; and stranger and more incredible than all else was the resemblance which Gaillard and his companions began to note in the face of the still growing figure. Gaillard felt as if he were looking into a mirror; for in all essential details the face was his own! The garments and shoes were faithful replicas of those worn by himself; and every limb and part of this outré being, even to the finger-tips, was proportioned like his!

The scientists saw that the process of growth was apparently complete. The figure stood with shut eyes and a somewhat blank and expressionless look on its features, like that of a man who has not yet awakened from slumber. It was still attached by a thick tendril to the breathing, mountainous node; and this tendril issued from the base of the brain, like an oddly misplaced umbilical cord.

The figure opened its eyes and stared at Gaillard with a long, level, enigmatic gaze that deepened his sense of shock and stupefaction. He sustained this gaze with the weirdest feeling imaginable — the feeling that he was confronted by his alter ego, by a *Doppelganger* in which was also the soul or intellect of some alien and vaster entity. In the regard of the cryptic eyes, he felt the same profound and sublime mystery that had looked out from the lake-sized orbs of shining dew or crystal in the plant-head.

The figure raised its right hand and seemed to beckon to him. Gaillard went slowly forward till he and his miraculous double stood face to face. Then the strange being placed its hand on his brow; and it seemed to Gaillard that a mesmeric spell was laid upon him from that moment. Almost without his own volition, for a purpose he was not yet permitted to understand, he began to speak; and the figure, imitating his every tone and cadence, repeated the words after him.

It was not till many minutes had elapsed, that Gaillard realized the true bearing and significance of this remarkable colloquy. Then with a start of clear consciousness, he knew that he was giving the figure lessons in the English language! He was pouring forth in a fluent, uninterrupted flood the main vocabulary of the tongue, together with its grammatical rules. And somehow, by a miracle of super-intellect, all that he said was being comprehended and remembered by his interlocutor.

Hours must have gone by during this process; and the Martian sun was now dipping toward the serrate walls of foliage. Dazed and exhausted, Gaillard realized that the long lesson was over; for the being removed its hand from his brow and addressed him in scholarly, well-modulated English:

“Thank you. I have learned all that I need to know for the purposes of linguistic communication. If you and your confreres will now attend me, I shall explain all that has mystified you, and declare the reasons for which you have been brought from your own world to the shores of a foreign planet.”

Like men in a dream, barely crediting the fantastic evidence of their senses and yet unable to refute or repudiate it, the earth-men listened while Gaillard’s amazing double continued:

“The being through whom I speak, made in the likeness of one of your own party, is a mere special organ which I have developed so that I could communicate with you. I, the informing entity, who combine in myself the utmost genius and energy of those two divisions of life which are known to you as the plant and the animal — I, who possess the virtual omniscience and immortality of a god, have had no need of articulate speech or formal language at any previous time in my existence. But since I include in myself all potentialities of evolution, together with mental powers that verge upon omniscience, I have had no difficulty whatever in acquiring this new faculty.

“It was I who constructed, with other special organs that I had put forth for this purpose, the space-flier that descended upon your planet and then returned to me a delegation, most of whom, I have surmised, would represent the scientific fraternities of man-kind. The building of the flier, and its mode of control, will be made plain when I tell you that I am the

master of many cosmic forces beyond the rays and energies known to tellurian savants. These forces I can draw from the air, the soil or the ether at will, or can even summon from remote stars and nebulae.

“The space-vessel was wrought from metal which I had integrated from molecules floating at random through the atmosphere; and I used the solar rays in concentrated form to create the temperature at which these metals were fused into a single sheet. The power used in propelling and guiding the vessel is a sort of super-electric energy whose exact nature I shall not elucidate, other than to say that it is associated with the basic force of gravity, and also with certain radiant properties of the interstellar ether not detectible by any instruments which you possess. I established in the flier the gravitation of Mars, and supplied it with Martian air and water, and also with chemically created food-stuffs, in order to accustom you during your voyage to the conditions that prevail on Mars.

“I am, as you may have already surmised, the sole inhabitant of this world. I could multiply myself if necessary; but so far, for reasons which you will soon apprehend, I have not felt that this would be desirable. Being complete and perfect in myself, I have had no need of companionship with other entities; and long ago, for my own comfort and security, I was compelled to extirpate certain rival plant-forms, and also certain animals who resembled slightly the mankind of your world; and who, in the course of their evolution, were becoming troublesome and even dangerous to me.

“With my two great eyes, which possess an optic magnifying power beyond that of your strongest telescopes, I have studied Earth and the other planets during the Martian nights, and have learned much regarding the conditions that exist upon each. The life of your world, your history, and the state of your civilization have been in many ways an open book to me; and I have also formed an accurate idea of the geological, faunal and floral

phenomena of your globe. I understand your imperfections, your social injustice and maladjustment, and the manifold disease and misery to which you are liable, owing to the dissonant, multiple entities into which the expression of your life-principle has been subdivided.

“From all such evils and error, I am exempt. I have attained to well-nigh absolute knowledge and masterdom; and there is no longer anything in the universe for me to fear, aside from the inevitable process of dehydration and dessication which Mars is slowly undergoing, like all other aging planets.

“This process I am unable to retard, except in a limited and partial manner; and I have already been compelled to tap the artesian waters of the planet in many places. I could live upon sunlight and air alone; but water is necessary to maintain the alimetal properties of the atmosphere; and without it, my immortality would fail in the course of time; my giant stems would shrink and shrivel; and my vast innumerable leaves would grow sere for want of the vital humor.

‘Your world is still young, with superabundant seas and streams and a moisture-laden air. You have more than is requisite of the element which I lack; and I have brought you here, as representative members of mankind, to propose an exchange which cannot be anything but beneficial to you as well as to myself.

“In return for a modicum of the water of your world, I will offer you the secrets of eternal life and infinite energy, and will teach you to overcome your social imperfections and to master wholly your planetary environment. Because of my great size, my stems and tendrils which girdle the Martian equator and reach even to the poles, it would be impossible for me to leave my natal world; but I will teach you how to colonize the other planets and explore the universe beyond. For these various ends, I suggest the making

of an intermundane treaty and a permanent alliance between myself and the peoples of Earth.

‘Consider well what I offer you; for the opportunity is without example or parallel. In relation to men, I am like a god in comparison with insects. The benefits which I can confer upon you are inestimable; and in return I ask only that you establish on Earth, under my instruction, certain transmitting stations using a super-potent wave-length, by means of which the essential elements of sea-water, minus the undesirable saline properties, can be teleported to Mars. The amount thus abstracted will make little or no difference in your tide-levels or in the humidity of your air; but for me, it will mean an assurance of everlasting life.’

The figure ended its peroration, and stood regarding the earth-men in polite and somewhat inscrutable silence. It waited for their answer.

As might have been expected, the emotions with which the delegation-members had heard this singular address were far from unanimous in their tenor. All the men were beyond mere surprise or astonishment, for miracle had been piled upon miracle till their brains were benumbed with wonder; and they had reached the point where they took the creation of a human figure and its endowment with human utterance wholly for granted. But the proposal made by the plant-entity through its man-like organ was another matter, and it played upon varying chords in the minds of the scientists, the reporters, the Mayor, and the Chief of Police.

Gaillard, who felt himself wholly in accord with this proposition, and more and more thoroughly *en rapport* with the Martian entity, wished to accede at once and to pledge his own support and that of his fellows to a furthering of the suggested treaty and plan of exchange. He was forced to point out to the Martian that the delegation, even if single-minded in its consent, was not empowered to represent the peoples of Earth in forming

the projected alliance; that the most it could do would be to lay the offer before the Government of the U.S, and of other terrestrial realms.

Half the scientists, after some deliberation, announced themselves as being in favor of the plan and willing to promote it to the utmost of their ability. The three reporters were also willing to do the same; and they promised, perhaps rashly, that the influence of the world-press would be added to that of the renowned savants.

Stilton and the other dogmatists of the party, however, were emphatically and even rapidly opposed, and declined to consider the Martian's offer for an instant. Any treaty or alliance of the sort, they maintained, would be highly undesirable and improper. It would never do for the nations of Earth to involve themselves in an entanglement of such questionable nature, or to hold commerce of any sort with a being such as the plant-monster, which had no rightful biologic status. It was unthinkable that orthodox and sound-minded scientists should lend their advocacy to anything so dubious. They felt too that there was a savor of deception and trickery about the whole business; and at any rate it was too irregular to be countenanced, or even to be considered with anything but reprehension.

The schism among the savants was rendered final by a hot argument, in which Stilton roundly denounced Gaillard and the other pro-Martians as virtual traitors to humanity, and intellectual Bolshevists whose ideas were dangerous to the integrity of human thought. Gresham and Poison were on the side of mental law and order, being professionally conservative; and thus the party was about evenly divided between those who favored accepting the Martian's offer, and those who spurned it with more or less suspicion and indignation.

During the course of this vehement dispute, the sun had fallen behind the high ramparts of foliage, and an icy chill, such as might well be looked for

in a semi-desolate world with attenuating air, had already touched the pale rose twilight. The scientists began to shiver; and their thoughts were distracted from the problem they had been debating by the physical discomfort of which they were increasingly conscious.

They heard the voice of the strange manikin in the dusk:

“I can offer you a choice of shelters for the night and also for the duration of your stay on Mars. You will find the space-flier well-lighted and warmed, with all the facilities which you may require. Also, I can offer you another hospitality.

Look beneath my foliage, a little to your right, where I am now preparing a shelter no less commodious and comfortable than the vessel — a shelter which will help to give you an idea of my varied powers and potentialities.”

The earth-men saw that the flier was brilliantly illuminated, pouring out a gorgeous amethystine radiance from its violet ports. Then, beneath the foliage close at hand, they perceived another and stranger luminosity which seemed to be emitted, like some sort of radio-active or noctilucous glow, by the great leaves themselves.

Even where they were standing, they felt a balmy warmth that began to temper the frigid air; and stepping toward the source of these phenomena, they found that the crowded leaves had lifted and arched themselves into a roomy alcove. The ground beneath was lined with a fabric-like substance of soft hues, deep and elastic underfoot, like a fine mattress. Ewers filled with liquids and platters of food-stuffs were disposed on low tables; and the air in the alcove was gentle as that of the spring night in a subtropic land.

Gaillard and the other pro-Martians, filled with profound awe and wonder, were ready to avail themselves at once of the shelter of this thaumaturgic hostelry. But the anti-Martians would have none of it, regarding it as the workmanship of the devil. Suffering keenly from the

cold, with chattering teeth and shivering limbs, they promenaded the open glade for some time, and at last were driven to seek the hospitable port of the space-flier, thinking it the lesser of two evils by some queer twist of logic.

The others, after eating and drinking from the mysteriously provided tables, laid themselves down on the mattress-like fabrics. They found themselves greatly refreshed by the liquid in the ewers, which was not water but some kind of roseate, aromatic wine. The food, a literal manna, was more agreeably flavored than that of which they had partaken during their voyage in the space-vessel. In the nerve-wrought and highly excited state that was consequent upon their experiences, none of them had expected to sleep. The unfamiliar air, the altered gravity, the unknown radiations of the exotic soul, as well as their unprecedented journey and the miraculous discoveries and revelations of the day, were all profoundly upsetting and conducive to a severe disequilibrium of mind and body.

However, Gaillard and his companions fell into a deep and dreamless slumber as soon as they had laid themselves down. Perhaps the liquid and solid refreshments which they had taken many have conduced to this; or perhaps there was some narcotic or mesmeric influence in the air, falling from the vast leaves or proceeding from the brain of the plant-lord.

The anti-Martians did not fare so well in this respect, and their slumber was restless and broken. Most of them had touched the proffered viands in the space-flier very sparingly; and Stilton, in particular, had refused to eat or drink at all. Doubtless, too, their antagonistic frame of mind was such as to make them more resistant to the hypnotic power of the plant, if such were being exerted. At any rate, they did not share in the benefits conferred upon the others.

A little before dawn, when Mars was still shrouded in crepuscular gloom but slightly lightened by the two small moons, Phobos and Deimos, Stilton arose from the soft couch on which he had tossed in night-long torment, and began to experiment once more, undeterred by his previous failure and discomfiture, with the mechanical controls of the vessel.

To his surprise, he found that the odd-shaped keys were no longer resistant to his fingers. He could move and arrange them at will; and he soon discovered the principle of their working and was able to levitate and steer the flier.

His confreres had now joined him, summoned by his shout of triumph. All were wide-awake, and jubilant with the wild hope of escaping from Mars and the jurisdiction of the plant-monster. Thrilling with this hope, and fearing every moment that the Martian would re-assert its esoteric control of the mechanism, they rose unhindered from the darkling glade to the alien skies and headed toward the brilliant green orb of Earth, descried among the unfamiliar constellations.

Looking back, they saw the vast eyes of the Martian watching them weirdly from the gloom, like pools of clear and bluish phosphorescence; and they shuddered with the dread of being recalled and re-captured. But, for some inscrutable reason, they were permitted to maintain their earthward course without interference. However, the voyage was fraught with a certain amount of disaster; and Stilton's clumsy pilotage hardly formed an ample substitute for the half-divine knowledge and skill of the Martian. More than once, the vessel collided with meteors; none of which, fortunately, were heavy enough to penetrate its hull. And when, after many hours, they approached the earth, Stilton failed to secure the proper degree of deceleration. The flier fell with terrible precipitancy and was saved from destruction only by dropping into the South Atlantic. The jarred mechanism

was rendered unworkable by the fall, and most of the occupants were severely bruised and stunned.

After floating at random for days, the coppery bulk was sighted by a northward-going liner and was towed to port in Lisbon. Here the scientists abandoned it, and made their way back to America, after detailing their adventures to representatives of the world-press, and issuing a solemn warning to all the world-peoples against the subversive designs and infamous proposals of the ultra-planetary monster.

The sensation created by their return and by the news they brought was tremendous. A tide of profound alarm and panic, due in part to the immemorial human aversion toward the unknown, swept immediately upon the nations; and immense, formless, exaggerated fears were bred like shadowy hydras in the dark minds of men.

Stilton and his fellow-conservatives continued to foster these fears, and to create with their pronouncements a globe-wide wave of anti-Martian prejudice, of blind opposition and dogmatic animosity. They enlisted on their side as many of the scientific fraternity as they could; that is to say, all those who were minded like themselves, as well as others overawed or subdued by the pressure of authority. They sought also, with much success, to marshal the political powers of the world in a strong league the would ensure the repudiation of any further offers of alliance from the Martian.

In all this gathering of inimical forces, this regimenting of earthly conservatism and insularity and ignorance, the religious factor, as was inevitable, soon asserted itself. The claim to divine knowledge and power made by the Martian, was seized upon by all the various mundane hierarchies, by Christian and Muhammadan, by Buddhist and Parsee and Voodooist alike, as forming a supremely heinous blasphemy. The impiety of such claims, and the menace of a non-anthropomorphic god and type of

worship that might be introduced on earth, could not be tolerated for a moment. Khalif and Pope, lama and imaum, parson and mahatma, all made common cause against this ultra-terrestrial invader.

Also, the reigning political powers felt that there might be something Bolshevistic behind the offer of the Martian to promote an Utopian state of society on earth. And the financial, commercial, and manufacturing interests likewise thought that it might imply a threat to their welfare or stability. In short, every branch of human life and activity was well represented in the anti-Martian movement.

In the interim, on Mars, Gaillard and his companions had awoken from their sleep to find that the luminous glow of the arching leaves had given place to the ardent gold of morn. They discovered that they could venture forth with comfort from the alcove; for the air of the glade without had grown swiftly warm beneath the rising sun.

Even before they had noticed the absence of the coppery flier, they were apprised of its departure by the man-organ of the great plant. This being, unlike its human prototypes, was exempt from fatigue; and it had remained standing or reclining all night against the fleshy wall to which it was attached. It now addressed the earth-men thus:

“For reasons of my own, I have made no attempt to prevent the flight of your companions, who with their blindly hostile attitude, would be worse than useless to me, and whose presence could only hinder the rapport which should exist between you and myself. They will reach the earth, and will try to warn its peoples against me and to poison their minds against my beneficent offer. Such an outcome, alas, cannot be avoided, even if I were to bring them back to Mars or divert their flight by means of my control and send them speeding forever through the void beyond the worlds. I perceive that there is much ignorance and dogmatism and blind self-interest to be

overcome, before the excelling light which I proffer can illumine the darkness of earthly minds.

“After I have kept you here for a few days, and have instructed you thoroughly in the secrets of my transcendent wisdom, and have imbued you with surprising powers that will serve to demonstrate my omnivalent superiority to the nations of Earth, I shall send you back to Earth as my ambassadors, and though you will meet with much opposition from your fellows, my cause will prevail in the end, beneath the infallible support of truth and science.

Gaillard and the others received this communication as well as the many that followed it, with supreme respect and semi-religious reverence. More and more they became convinced that they stood in the presence of a higher and ampler entity than man; that the intellect which thus discoursed to them through the medium of a human form was well-nigh inexhaustible in its range and depth, and possessed many characteristics of infinitude and more than one attribute of deity.

Agnostic though most of them were by nature or training, they began to accord a certain worship to this amazing plant-lord; and they listened with an attitude of complete submission if not of abjection, to the out-pourings of cycle-gathered lore, and immortal secrets of cosmic law and life and energy, in which the great being proceeded to instruct them.

The illumination thus accorded them was both simple and esoteric. The plant-lord began by dwelling at some length upon the monistic nature of all phenomena, of matter, light, color, sound, electricity, gravity, and all other forms of irradiation, as well as time and space; which, it said, were only the various perceptual manifestations of a single underlying principle or substance.

The listeners were then taught the evocation and control, by quite rudimentary chemical media, of many forces and rates of energy that had hitherto, lain beyond the detection of human senses or instruments. They were taught also the terrific power obtainable by refracting with certain sensitized elements the ultraviolet and infra-red rays of the spectrum; which, in a highly concentrated form, could be used for the disintegration and rebuilding of the molecules of matter.

They learned how to make engines that emitted beams of destruction and transmutation; and how to employ these unknown beams, more potent even than the so-called “cosmic rays,” in the renewal of human tissues and the conquest of disease and old age.

Simultaneously with this tuition, the plant-lord carried on the building of a new space-car, in which the earth-men were to return to their own planet and preach the Martian evangel. The construction of this car, whose plates and girders seemed to materialize out of the void air before their very gaze, was a practical lesson in the use of arcanic natural forces. Atoms that would form the requisite alloys were brought together from space by the play of invisible magnetic beams, were fused by concentrated solar heat in a specially refractive zone of atmosphere, and were then moulded into the desired form as readily as the bottle that shapes itself from the pipe of the glass-blower.

Equipped with this new knowledge and potential masterdom, with a cargo of astounding mechanism and devices made for their use by the plant-lord, the pro-Martians finally embarked on their earthward voyage.

A week after the abduction of the thirty-five earth-men from the stadium at Berkeley, the space-car containing the Martian’s proselytes landed at noon in this same stadium. Beneath the infinitely skilful and easy control of the far-off plant-being, it came down without accident, lightly as a bird; and

as soon as the news of its arrival had spread, it was surrounded by a great throng, in which the motives of hostility and curiosity were almost equally paramount.

Through the denunciation of the dogmatists led by Stilton, the savants and the three reporters beneath the leadership of Gaillard had been internationally outlawed before their arrival. It was expected that they would return sooner or later through the machinations of the plant-lord; and a special ruling that forbade them to land on terrene soil, under penalty of imprisonment, had been made by all the Governments.

Ignorant of this, and ignorant also of how wide-spread and virulent was the prejudice against them, they opened the vessel's port and stood in readiness to emerge.

Gaillard, going first, paused at the head of the metal stairway, and something seemed to arrest him as he looked down on the milling faces of the mob that had gathered with incredible swiftness. He saw enmity, fear, hatred, suspicion, in many of these faces; and in others a gaping and zany-like inquisitiveness, such as might be shown before the freaks of some travelling circus. A small corps of policemen, elbowing and thrusting the rabble aside with officious rudeness, was pushing toward the front; and cries of derision and hatred, gathering by two and threes and uniting to a rough roar, were now hurled at the occupants of the car.

"Damn the pro-Martians! Down with the dirty traitors! Hang the — dogs!"

An overripe tomato, large and dripping, sailed toward Gaillard and splashed on the steps at his feet. Hisses and hoots and cat-calls added to the roaring bedlam, but above it all, he and his comrades heard a quiet voice that spoke within the car; the voice of the Martian, borne across inestimable miles of ether:

“Beware, and defer your landing. Resign yourselves to my guidance, and all will be well”

Gaillard stepped back as he heard this minatory voice, and the valvular port closed quickly behind the folded stairs, just as the policemen who had come to arrest the vessel’s occupants broke from the forefront of the throng.

Peering out on those hateful faces, Gaillard and his brother-savants beheld an astounding manifestation of the Martian’s power. A wall of violet flame, descending from the remote heavens to the ground, seemed to intervene between the car and the crowd, and the policemen, bruised and breathless but uninjured, were hurled backward as if by a great wave. This flame, whose color changed to blue and green and yellow and scarlet like a sort of aurora, played for hours about the vessel and rendered it impossible for anyone to approach. Retreating to a respectful distance, awe-struck and terrified, the crowd looked on in silence; and the police waited in vain for a chance to fulfil their commission. After awhile, the flame became white and misty, and upon it, as upon the bosom of a cloud, a bizarre and mirage-like scene was imprinted, visible alike to the occupants of the car and the throng without. This scene was the Martian landscape in which the central brain of the plant-lord was located; and the crowd gasped with astonishment as it met the gaze of the enormous telescopic eyes, and saw the unending stems and league-wide masses of sempervirent foliage. Other scenes and demonstrations followed, all of which were calculated to impress upon the throng the wonder-working powers and marvelous faculties of this remote being. Pictures that illustrated the historic life of the Martian, as well as the various arcanic natural energies subject to its dominion, followed each other in rapid succession. The purpose of the desired alliance with Earth, and the benefits which would accrue thereby to humanity, were also depicted. The divine benignity and wisdom of this puissant being, its superior organic

nature, and its vital and scientific supremacy, were made plain to the dullest observer.

Many of those who had come to scoff, or had been prepared to receive the pro-Martians and their evangel with scorn and hate and violence, became converted to the alien cause forthwith by these sublime demonstrations.

However, the more dogmatic scientists, the true “die-hards” as represented by Godfrey Stilton, maintained an adamant obstructionism, in which they were supported by the officers of law and government, as well as by the presbyters of the various religions. The world-wide dissidence of opinion which soon resulted, became the cause of many civil wars or revolution, and, in one or two cases, ended in actual warfare between nations.

Numerous efforts were made to apprehend or destroy the Martian space-car, which, beneath the guidance of its ultra-planetary master, appeared in many localities all over the world, descending suddenly from the stratosphere to perform incredible scientific miracles before the eyes of astonished multitudes. In all quarters of the globe, the mirage-like pictures were flashed on the screen of cloudy fire, and more and more people went over to the new cause.

Bombing planes pursued the vessel and sought to drop their deadly freight upon it, but without success; for whenever the car was endangered, the auroral flames intervened, deflecting and hurling back the exploded bombs, often to the detriment of their launchers.

Gaillard and his confreres, with leonine boldness, emerged many times from the car, to display before crowds or selected bodies of savants the marvellous inventions and chemical thaumaturgies with which they had been endowed by the Martian. Everywhere the police sought to arrest them,

maddened mobs endeavored to do them violence, armed regiments tried to surround them and cut them off from the car. But with an adroitness that seemed no less than supernatural, they contrived always to elude capture; and often they discomfited their pursuers by astonishing displays or evocations of esoteric force, temporarily paralyzing the civic officers with unseen rays, or creating about themselves a defensive zone of intolerable heat or trans-arctic cold.

In spite of all these myriad demonstrations, however, the citadels of human ignorance and insularity remained impregnable in many places.

Deeply alarmed by this ultra-terrene menace to their stability, the governments and religious of Earth, as well as the more conservative scientific elements, rallied their resources in a most heroic and determined effort to stem the incursion. Men of all ages, everywhere, were conscripted for service in the national armies; and even women and children were equipped with the deadliest weapons of the age for use against the pro-Martians, who, with their wives and families, were classed as infamous renegades to be hunted down and killed without ceremony like dangerous beasts.

The internecine warfare that ensued was the most terrible in human history. Class became divided against class and family against family. New and more lethal gases than any heretofore employed, were devised by chemists, and whole cities or territories were smothered beneath their agonizing pall. Others were blown into skyward-flying fragments by single charges of superpotent explosives; and war was carried on by planes, by rocketships, by submarine, by dreadnaughts, by tanks, by every vehicle and engine of death or destruction that the homicidal ingenuity of man had yet created.

The pro-Martians, who had won several victories at first, were gravely outnumbered; and the tide of battle began to turn against them. Scattered in many lands, they found themselves unable to unite and organize their forces to the same degree as those of their official opponents. Though Gaillard and his devoted confreres went everywhere in the space-vessel, aiding and abetting the radicals, and instructing them in the use of new weapons and cosmic energies, the party suffered great reverses through the sheer brute preponderance of its foes. More and more it became split up into small bands, hunted and harried, and driven to seek refuge in the wilder or less explored sections of the earth.

In North America, however, a large army of the scientific rebels, whose families had been compelled to join them, contrived to hold the antagonists at bay for awhile. Surrounded at last, and faced by overwhelming odds, this army was on the verge of a crushing defeat.

Gaillard, hovering above the black, voluminous clouds of the battle, in which poisonous gases mingled with the fumes of high explosives, felt for the first time the encroachment of actual despair. It seemed to him, and also to his companions, that the Martian had abandoned them, disgusted perhaps with the bestial horror of it all and the hateful, purblind narrowness and fanatic nescience of mankind.

Then, through the smoke-smothered air, a fleet of coppery-golden cars descended, to land on the battle-front among the Martian adherents. There were thousands of these cars; and from all the entrance-ports, which had opened simultaneously, there issued the voice of the planet-lord, summoning its supporters and bidding them enter the vessels.

Saved from annihilation by this act of Martian providence, the entire army obeyed the command; and as soon as the last man, woman and child had gone aboard, the ports closed again, and the fleet of space-cars,

wheeling in graceful and derisive spirals above the heads of the baffled conservatives, soared from the battle-clouds like a flock of reddish-golden birds and vanished in the noon-tide heavens, led by the car containing Gaillard's party.

At the same time, in all portions of the world where the little bands of heroic radicals had been cut off and threatened with capture or destruction, other cars descended in like manner and carried away the pro-Martians and their families even to the last unit. These vessels joined the main fleet in mid-space; and them all continued their course beneath the mysterious piloting of the plant-lord, flying at super-cosmic velocity through the star-surrounded gulf.

Contrary to the anticipations of the mundane exiles, the vessels were not drawn toward Mars; and it soon became evident that their objective was the planet Venus. The voice of the Martian, speaking athwart the eternal ether, made the following announcement:

“In my infinite wisdom, my supreme foreprescience, I have removed you from the hopeless struggle to establish on Earth the sovereign light and truth which I offer. You alone I have found worthy; and the moiety of mankind, who have refused salvation with hatred and contumely, preferring the natal darkness of death and disease and ignorance in which they were born, must be left henceforward to their inevitable fate.”

“You, as my loyal and well-trusted servants, I am sending forth to colonize beneath my tutelage a great continent on the planet Venus, and to found amid the primal exuberance of this new world a super-scientific nation.”

The fleet soon approached Venus, and circled the equator for a great distance in the steam-thick atmosphere, through which nothing could be descried other than a hot and over-fuming ocean, close to the boiling-point,

which seemed to cover the entire plane. Here, beneath the never-settling sun, intolerable temperatures prevailed everywhere, such as would have parboiled the flesh of a human being exposed directly to the semi-aqueous air. Suffering even in their insulated cars from this terrific heat, the exiles wondered how they were to exist in such a world.

At least, however, their destination came in view and their doubts were resolved. Nearing the nightward side of Venus which is never exposed to daylight, in a latitude where the sun slanted far behind them as over arctic realms, they beheld through thinning vapors an immense tract of land, the sole continent amid the planetary sea. This continent was covered by rich jungles, containing a flora and fauna similar to those of pre-glacial eras on the earth. Calamites and cycads and fern-plants of unbelievable luxuriance revealed themselves to the earth-men; and they saw everywhere the great, brainless reptiles, the megalosaurs, plesiosaurs, labyrinthodons and pterodactyls of Jurassic times.

Beneath the instruction of the Martian, before landing, they slew these reptiles, incinerating them completely with infra-red beams, so that not even their carcasses would remain to taint the air with putrefactive effluvia. When the whole continent had been cleared of its noxious life, the cars descended; and emerging, the colonists found themselves in a terrain of unequalled fertility, whose very soil seemed to pulsate with primordial vigors, and whose air was rich with ozone and oxygen and nitrogen.

Here the temperature, though still sub-tropic, was agreeable and balmy; and through the use of protective fabrics provided by the Martian, the earth-men soon accustomed themselves to the eternal sunlight and intense ultra-violet radiation. With the super-knowledge at their disposal, they were able to combat the unknown, highly pernicious bacteria peculiar to Venus, and even to exterminate such bacteria in the course of time. They became the

lords of salubrious climate, dowered with four mild and equable seasons by the slight annual rotation of the planet; but having one eternal day, like the mythic Isles of the Blest beneath a low and undeparting sun.

Beneath the leadership of Gaillard, who remained in close rapport and continual communication with the plant-lord, the great forests were cleared in many places. Cities of lofty and ethereal architecture, lovely as those of some trans-stellar Eden, builded by the use of force-beams, began to rear their graceful turrets and majestic cumuli of domes above the gigantic calamites and ferns.

Through the labors of the terrene exiles, a truly Utopian nation was established, giving allegiance to the plant-lord as to some tutelary deity; a nation devoted to cosmic progress, to scientific knowledge, to spiritual tolerance and freedom; a happy, law-abiding nation, blest with millennial longevity, and exempt from sorrow and disease and error.

Here, too, on the shores of the Venusian sea, were builded the great transmitters that sent through interplanetary space, in ceaseless waves of electronic radiation, the water required to replenish the dehydrated air and soil of Mars, and thus to ensure for the plant-being a perpetuity of god-like existence.

In the meanwhile, on earth, unknown to Gaillard and his fellow-exiles, who had made no effort to communicate with the abandoned world, an amazing thing had occurred; a final proof of the virtual omnipotence and all-inclusive sapience of the Martian.

In the great vale of Kashmeer, in Northern India, there descended one day from the clear heavens a mile-long seed, flashing like a huge meteor, and terrifying the superstitious Asian peoples, who saw in its fall the portent of some tremendous disaster. The seed rooted itself in this valley; and before its true nature had been ascertained, the supposed meteorite began to

sprout and send forth on all sides a multitude of mammoth tendrils which burst immediately into leaf. It covered both the southward plains and the eternal snows and rock of the Hindu Kush and Himalayas with their gigantic verdure.

Soon the Afghan mountaineers could hear the explosion of its leaf-buds amid their passes, echoing like distant thunder; and, at the same time, it rushed like a Juggernaut upon Central India. Spreading in all directions, and growing with the speed of express-trains, the tendrils of the mighty vine proceeded to enmesh the Asian realms. Overshadowing vales, peaks, hills, plateaus, deserts, cities and sea-boards with its titan leaves, it invaded Europe and Africa; and then, bridging Bering Straits, it entered North America and ran southward, ramifying on all sides till the whole continent, and also South America even to Tierra de Fuego, had been buried beneath the masses of insuperable foliage.

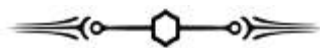
Frantic efforts to stay the progress of the plant were made by armies with bombs and cannon, with lethal sprays and gases; but all in vain. Everywhere humanity was smothered beneath the vast leaves, like those of some omnipresent upas, which emitted a stupefying and narcotic odor that conferred upon all who inhaled it a swift euthanasia.

Soon the plant had netted the whole globe; for the seas offered little or no barrier to its full-grown stems and tendrils. When the process of growth was complete, the anti-Martian moiety of the human race had joined the uncouth monsters of pre-historic time in that limbo of oblivion to which all superseded and out-dated genera have gone. But, through the divine clemency of the plant-lord, the final death that overtook the “die-hards” was no less easy than irresistible.

Stilton and a few of his associates contrived to evade the general doom for awhile by fleeing in a rocket-ship to the Antaretic plateau. Here, as they

were congratulating themselves on their escape, they saw far-off on the horizon the rearing of the swift stems, beneath whose foliage the ice and snow appeared to melt away in rushing torrents. These torrents soon became a diluvial sea, in which the last dogmatists were drowned. Only in this way did they elude the euthanasia of the great leaves, which had overtaken all their fellows.

Symposium of the Gorgon



I DO NOT remember where or with whom the evening had begun. Nor can I recall what vintages, brews and distillations I had mingled by the way. In those nights of an alcoholically flaming youth I was likely to start anywhere, drink anything and end up anywhere else than at the port of embarkation.

It was therefore with interest but with little surprise that I found myself among the guests at the symposium in the Gorgon's hall. Do not ask me how I got there: I am still vague about it myself. It would be useless to tell you even if I could, unless you are one of the rare few elected for similar adventures. And if you are one of these, the telling would be needless.

Liquor brings oblivion to most; but to certain others, enfranchisement from time and space, the awareness of Tao, of all that is or has ever been or will ever be. By liquor I mean of course the true essence poured from the Dive Bouteille. But, on occasion, any bottle can be divine.

Just why, at that particular time, after what must have been a round of mundane bar-rooms, I should have entered the mythologic palace of Medusa, is a matter hardly apparent but determined, no doubt, by the arcanic and inflexible logic of alcohol. The night had been foggy, not to say wet; and on such nights one is prone to stray into the unlikeliest places. It was not the first time I had gotten a little mixed up in regard to the Einsteinian continuum.

Having read Bullfinch and other mythologists, I had small difficulty in orienting myself to the situation. At the moment of my entrance into the spacious early Grecian hall, I was stopped by a slave-girl attired only in

three garlands of roses arranged to display and enhance her charms. This girl presented me with a brightly polished silver mirror, the rim and handle of which were twined appropriately with graven serpents. She also gave me a capacious wine-cup of unglazed clay. In a low voice, in the purest Greek of pre-Euripidean drama, she told me, the mirror's purpose. The cup I could fill as often as I pleased, or was able, at a fountain of yellow wine in the foreground, rilling from the open mouth of a marble sea nymph that rose from amidst its bubbling ripples.

Thus forewarned, I kept my eyes on the mirror which reflected the room before me with admirable clearness. I saw that my fellow-guests — at least any who possessed hands — had also been considerately equipped with mirrors, in which they could look with safety at their hostess whenever politeness required.

Medusa sat in a high-armed chair at the hall's center, weeping constant tears that could not dim the terrible brightness of her eyes. Her tonsure of curling serpents writhed and lifted incessantly. On each arm of the chair perched a woman-headed, woman-breasted fowl that I recognized as a harpy. In other chairs, the two sisters of Medusa sat immobile with lowered eyes.

All three were draining frequent cups served with averted eyes by the slave-girls, but showed no sign of intoxication.

There seemed to be a lot of statuary about the place: men, women, dogs, goats, and other animals as well as birds. These, the first slave-girl whispered as she passed me, consisted of the various unwary victims turned to stone by the Gorgon's glance. In a whisper lower still, she added that the fatal visit of Perseus, coming to be-head Medusa, was momentarily expected.

I felt that it was high time for a drink, and moved forward to the verge of the vinous pool. A number of ducks and swans, standing unsteadily about it with wine-splashed plumage, dipped their beaks in the fluid and tilted their heads back, with obvious relish. They hissed at me viciously as I stepped among them. I slipped on their wet droppings and plunged hastily into the pool, but still retained the cup and the mirror as well as my footing. The fluid was quite shallow. Amid the loud quacking of the startled birds and the giggling of several golden-tressed sirens and russet-haired Nereids who sat on the farther edge, stirring the pool to luminous ripples with their cod-like tails, I stepped forward, splashing ankle-deep, to the marble sea-girl and lifted my cup to the yellow stream that issued from her grinning mouth. The cup filled instantly and slopped over, drenching my shirt-front. I drained it at a gulp. The wine was strong and good, though tasting heavily of resin like other antique vintages.

Before I could raise the cup for a second draft, it seemed that a flash of lightning, together with a violent wind, leapt horizontally across the hall from the open doorway. My face was fanned as if by the passing of a god. Forgetting the danger, I raised my eyes toward Medusa, over whom the lightning hovered and swung back with the movement of a weapon about to strike.

I remember my mythology. It was indeed the sword of Perseus, who wore Mercury's winged shoes and the helmet loaned by Hades which made him invisible. (Why the sword alone should be perceptible to sight, no myth-maker has explained.) The sword fell, and the head of Medusa sprang from her seated body and rolled in a spatter of blood across the floor and into the pool where I stood petrified. It was a moment of pandemonium. The ducks and geese scattered, quacking, honking madly, and the sirens and Nereids fled shrieking. They dropped their mirrors as they went. The head

sank with a great splash, then rose to the surface. I caught a sidelong flick of one dreadful agonized eye — the left — as the head rolled over and soared from the water, its snaky locks caught in an unseen armored grip by the pursuing demigod. Then, Perseus and his victim were gone, with a last lightning flash of the sword, through the doorway where the nymphs had vanished.

I climbed from the reddening pool, too dazed to wonder why I stiff retained power of movement after meeting the Gorgon's eye. The slave-girls had disappeared. The trunk of Medusa had fallen forward from its chair, upon which the harpies still perched.

Beside Medusa stood a beautiful winged white horse, dabbled from hoofs to mane with the blood that still ran from the fallen monster's neck. I knew that it must be Pegasus, born of her decapitation according to myth.

Pegasus pranced lightly toward me, neighing in excellent Greek:

"We must go. The decrees of the gods have been fulfilled. I see that you are a stranger from another time and space. I will take you wherever you wish to go, or as near to it as possible."

Pegasus kneeled and I mounted him bareback, since he had been born without saddle or reins.

"Cling tightly to my mane. I will not unhorse you," he promised, "whatever the speed or altitude of our journey."

He trotted out through the doorway, spread his shining wings on an orient dawn, and took off toward the reddening cirrus clouds. I turned my head a little later. An ocean lay behind us, far down, with raging billows turned to mere ripples by distance. The lands of morning gleamed before us.

"To what period of time, and what region?" asked Pegasus above the rhythmic drumming of his wings.

“I came from a country known as America, in the 20th century,” I replied, raising my voice to reach his ears through the thunder.

Pegasus bridled and almost stopped in mid-flight. -

“My prophetic insight forbids me to oblige you. I cannot visit the century, and, in particular, the country, that you name. Any poets who are born there must do without me-must hoist themselves to inspiration by their own bootstraps, rather than by the steed of the Muses. If I ventured to land there, I should be im-pounded at once and my wings clipped. Later they would sell me for horse meat.”

“You underrate their commercial acumen,” I said. “They’d put you in a side-show and charge a stiff en-trance fee. You’re well known, in a way. Your name and picture are on sideboards at many gas-stations. A synonym for speed if nothing else.

“Anyway, there is little inducement for me to re-turn. I have been trying to drink myself out of it for years and decades. Why end up, as I will sooner or later, at the highly expensive mercy of doctors, hospitals and undertakers?”

“You are certainly sensible, will you indicate a place and period more to your liking?”

I mused awhile, reviewing all I could remember of both history and geography.

“Well,” I decided at last, “some South Sea island might do, before the discovery by Captain Cook and the coming of the missionaries.”

Pegasus began to accelerate his flight. Day and darkness shuttled by, sun, moon and stars were streaks above, and the regions below were blurred by inconceivable speed, so that I could not distinguish fertile from desert, land from water. We must have circled the earth innumerable times, through the birth and death of millenniums.

Gradually the speed of the winged horse decelerated. A cloudless sun became stable overhead. A balmy subtropic sea, full of green islands, rolled softly on all sides to the horizon.

Pegasus made an easy landing on the nearest island, and I slipped dizzily from his back.

“Good luck, he neighed. Then, stretching his wings once more, he soared toward the sun and disappeared with the suddenness of a time-machine.

Feeling that Pegasus had abandoned me in a rather summary fashion, I peered about at my surroundings. At first sight I had been left in an uninhabited isle, on a coral reef lined with untrodden grass and rimmed with pandanus and breadfruit trees.

Presently the foliage stiffed and several natives crept forth. They were elaborately tattooed and armed with wooden clubs studded with sharks’ teeth. Judging from their gestures of fear and wonder, they had never seen a white man or a horse of any color, winged or un-winged. They dropped their clubs as they neared me, and pointed questioning fingers, a trifle shaky, at the skies where Pegasus had vanished.

“Think nothing of it,” I said in my suavest and most reassuring tones. Remembering a vague religious up-bringing, I made the sign of benediction.

The savages grinned shyly, displaying an array of filed teeth only less formidable than the sharks’ incisors and molars that decorated their clubs. Plainly they were losing their fear and making me welcome to the island. Their eyes appraised me with inscrutable blandness, like those of innocent children who expect some-one to feed them.

I am pencilling this account in a small notebook found in one of my pockets. Three weeks have passed since Pegasus left me among the cannibals. They have treated me well and have fattened me with all the

abundance that the isle affords. With taro and roast pig, with breadfruit, cocoanuts, guavas, and many un-known delicious vegetables. I feel like a thanksgiving turkey.

How do I know they are cannibals? By human bones, hair, skin, piled or strewn about as animal remnants are in the neighborhood of slaughter-houses. Apparently they have moved their feasting places only when the bones got too thick. Bones of men, women, children, mixed with those of birds, pigs and small four — footed creatures. An untidy lot, even for anthropophagi.

The island is of small extent, perhaps no more than a mile in width by two in length. I have not learned its name and am uncertain to which of the many far-flung archipelagos it belongs. But I have picked up a few words of the soft, many-vowelled language — mainly the names of foodstuffs.

They have domiciled me in a clean enough hut, which I occupy alone. None of the women, who are comely enough and quite friendly, has offered to share it with me. Perhaps this is for therapeutic reasons — perhaps they fear I might lose weight if I were to indulge in amorous activity. Anyway, I am relieved. AR women are cannibalistic, even if they don't literally tear the meat from one's bones. They devour time, money, attention, and give treachery in return. I have long learned to avoid them. Long ago my devotion to drink became single-hearted. Liquor at least has been faithful to me. It requires no eloquence, no flattery, no blandishments. To me, at least, it makes no false promises.

I wish Pegasus would return and carry me off again. Truly I made a chuckle-headed choice in selecting one of the South Sea isles. I am weaponless; and I don't swim very well. The natives could overtake me quickly if I stole one of their outrigger canoes. I never was much good at

boating even in my college days. Bar-ring a miracle, I am destined to line the gizzards of these savages.

The last few days they have allowed me all the palm-wine I can drink. Perhaps they believe it will improve the flavor. I swig it frequently and lie on my back staring at the bright blue skies where only parrots and sea-birds pass. I cannot get drunk and delirious enough to imagine that any of them is the winged horse. And I curse them in five languages, in English, Greek, French, Spanish, Latin, because they cannot be mistaken for Pegasus. Perhaps, if I had plenty of high-proof Scotch and Bourbon, I could walk out of this particular time-plexus into something quite, different ... as I did from modern New York into the ancient palace of Medusa.

Another entry, which I hardly expected to make. I don't know the day, the month, the year, the century. But according to these misguided islanders — and mine — it was pot day. They brought out the pot at mid-morning: a huge vessel of blackening battered bronze inscribed around the sides with Chinese characters. It must have been left here by some far-strayed or storm — wrecked junk. I don't like to conjecture the fate of the crew, if any survived and came ashore. Being boiled in their own cooking-pot must have been a curious irony.

To get back to my tale. The natives had set out huge quantities of palm-wine in crude earthen vessels, and they and I were getting ginned up as fast as we could. I wanted a share of the funeral feast, even if I was slated to afford the piece-de-resistance.

Presently there was a lot of jabbering and gesticulating. The chief, a big burly ruffian, was giving orders. A number of the natives scattered into the woods, and some returned with vessels full of springwater which they emptied into the pot, while others piled dry grass and well-seasoned fagots around its base. A fire was started with flint and an old piece of metal which

looked like the broken-off end of a Chinese sword-blade. It was probably a relic of the same junk that had provided the pot.

I hoped that the user had broken it only after laying out a long file of cannibals.

In a rather futile effort to raise my spirits, I began to sing the Marseillaise, and followed it with Lulu and various other bawdies. Presently the water was bubbling, and the cooks turned their attention to me. They seized me, stripped off my ragged clothes, and trussed me up adroitly, knees to chest and arms doubled at the sides, with some sort of tough vegetable fiber. Then, singing what was doubtless a cannibal chanty, they picked me up and heaved me into the pot, where I landed with a splash and settled more or less upright in a sitting position.

At least, I had thought they would knock me on the head beforehand rather than boil me like a live lobster.

In my natural fright and confusion it took me some moments to realize that the water, which had seemed scalding hot, was in reality no warmer to the epidermis than my usual morning tub. In fact it was quite agree-able. Judging by the violence with which it bubbled beneath my chin, it was not likely to grow much hotter.

This anomaly of sensation puzzled me mightily. By all rights I should be suffering agonies. Then, like a flash of lightning, I remembered the passing sidelong flick of Medusa's left eye and the apparent lack of effect at the time. Her glance had in no way petrified me-but in some strange fashion it must have toughened my skin, which was now impervious to the normal effects of heat; and perhaps also to other phenomena. Perhaps, to cause the mythic petrification, it was necessary to sustain the regard of both the Gorgon's eyes.

These things are mysteries. Anyway, it was as if I had been given a flexible asbestos hide. But, curiously enough, my keenness of touch was unimpaired.

Through the veering smoke I saw that the cooks were coming back, laden with basket of vegetables. They were all getting drunker; and the chief was the drunkest. He lurched about, waving his war-club, while the others emptied their baskets into the kettle. Only then did they perceive that things had not proceeded according to culinary rules. Their eyes grew rounder and they yelled with surprise to see me grinning at them from the steaming ebullient contents. One of the cooks made a pass at my throat with a stone knife-and the knife broke in the middle. Then the chief stepped forward, shouting ferociously, and hoisted his toothed war — club.

I ducked under water and to one side. The club descended, making a huge splash-and missed me. Judging from their outcries, some of the cooks must have been scalded by the flying water. The chief fared worse. Over-balanced by that mighty stroke, he lurched against the pot, which careened heavily, spilling much of the contents. Using my weight repeatedly against the side, I managed to overthrow the vessel, and rolled out in a torrent of water, smoke, and vegetables.

The chief, yowling from what must have been third — degree burns, was trying to extricate himself from the brands and embers into which he had fallen. Limping, he got to his feet after several vain attempts and staggered away. The other cooks, and the expectant feasters, had already decamped. I had the field to myself.

Looking around, I noticed the broken-off sword which had been used in striking fire, and levered my-self in its direction. Holding it clumsily, I contrived to work my wrist-fetters against the edge. The blade was still

fairly sharp and I soon had my hands free. After that it was no trick to untruss my legs.

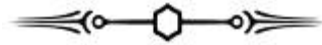
The wine had worn off but there were many unemptied pots of it still around. I collected two or three, and put some of the spilled vegetables to roast amid the glowing coals. Then, waiting comfortably for the cannibals' return, I began to laugh.

I was washing down a well-baked taro root with the' second pot of wine when the first of them crawled out of the woods and fell prostrate before me. I learned afterwards that they were deprecating my anger and were very sorry they had not recognized me as a god.

They have christened me in their own tongue. The — One-who-cannot-be-cooked.

I wish that Pegasus would return.

The Theft of the Thirty-Nine Girdles



LET IT BE said as a foreword to this tale that I have robbed no man who was not in some way a robber of others. In all my long and arduous career, I, Satampra, Zerios of Uzuldaroum, sometimes known as the master-thief have endeavored to serve merely as an agent in the rightful redistribution of wealth. The adventure I have now to relate was no exception; though as it happened in the outcome, my own pecuniary profits were indeed meager, not to say trifling.

Age is upon me now. And sitting at that leisure which I have earned through many hazards, I drink the wines that are heartening to age. To me, as I sip, return memories of splendid loot and brave nefarious enterprise. Before me shine the outpoured sackfuls of *djals* or *pazoors*, removed so dexterously from the coffers of iniquitous merchants and moneylenders. I dream of rubies redder than the blood that was shed for them; of sapphires bluer than depths of glacial ice; of emeralds greener than the jungle in spring. I recall the escalate of pronged balconies; the climbing of terraces and towers guarded by monsters; the sacking of altars beneath the eyes of malign idols or sentinel serpents.

Often I think of Vixeela, my one true love and the most adroit and courageous of my companions in burglary. She has long since gone to the bourn of all good thieves and comrades; I have mourned her sincerely these many years. But still dear is the memory of our amorous, adventurous nights and the feats we performed together. Of such feats, perhaps the most signal and audacious was the theft of the thirty-nine girdles.

These were the golden and jeweled chastity girdles, worn by the virgins vowed to the moon god Leniqua, whose temple had stood from immemorial time in the suburbs of Uzuldaroum, capital of Hyperborea. The virgins were always thirty-nine in number. They were chosen for their youth and beauty, and retired from service to the god at the age of thirty-one.

The girdles were padlocked with the toughest bronze and their keys retained by the high-priest who, on certain nights, rented them at a high price to the richer gallants of the city. It will thus be seen that the virginity of the priestesses was nominal; but its frequent and repeated sale was regarded as a meritorious act of sacrifice to the god.

Vixeela herself had at one time been numbered among the virgins but had fled from the temple and from Uzuldaroum several years before the sacerdotal age of release from her bondage. She would tell me little of her life in the temple; I surmised that she had found small pleasure in the religious prostitution and had chafed at the confinement entailed by it. After her flight she had suffered many hardships in the cities of the south. Of these too, she spoke but sparingly, as one who dreads the reviving of painful recollections.

She had returned to Uzuldaroum a few months prior to our first meeting. Being now a little over age, and having dyed her russet-blonde hair to a raven black, she had no great fear of recognition by Leniqua's priests. As was their custom, they had promptly replaced her loss with another and younger virgin, and would have small interest now in one so long delinquent.

At the time of our fore-gathering, Vixeela had already committed various petty larcenies. But, being unskilled, she had failed to finish any but the easier and simpler ones, and had grown quite thin from starvation. She was still attractive and her keenness of wit and quickness in learning soon

endeared her to me. She was small and agile and could climb like a lemur. I soon found her help invaluable, since she could climb through windows and other apertures impassable to my greater bulk.

We had consummated several lucrative burglaries, when the idea of entering Leniqua's temple and making away with the costly girdles occurred to me. The problems offered, and the difficulties to be overcome, appeared at first sight little less than fantastic. But such obstacles have always challenged my acumen and have never daunted me.

Firstly, there was the problem of entrance without detection and serious mayhem at the hands of the sickle-armed priests who guarded Leniqua's fane with baleful and incorruptible vigilance. Luckily, during her term of temple service, Vixeela had learned of a subterranean adit, long disused but, she believed still passable. This entrance was through a tunnel, the continuation of a natural cavern located somewhere in the woods behind Uzuldaroum. It had been used almost universally by the virgins' visitors in former ages. But the visitors now entered openly by the temple's main doors or by posterns little less public; a sign, perhaps, that religious sentiment had deepened or that modesty had declined.

Vixeela had never seen the cavern herself but she knew its approximate location. The temple's inner adit was closed only by a flagstone, easily levitated from below or above, behind the image of Leniqua in the great nave.

Secondly, there was the selection of a proper time, when the women's girdles had been unlocked and laid aside. Here again Vixeela was invaluable, since she knew the nights on which the rented keys were most in demand. These were known as nights of sacrifice, greater or lesser, the chief one being at the moon's full. All the women were then in repeated request.

Since, however, the fane on such occasions would be crowded with people, the priests, the virgins and their clients, a seemingly insurmountable difficulty remained. How were we to collect and make away with the girdles in the presence of so many persons? This, I must admit, baffled me.

Plainly, we must find some way in which the temple could be evacuated, or its occupants rendered unconscious or otherwise incapable during the period needed for our operations.

I thought of a certain soporific drug, easily and quickly vaporized, which I had used on more than one occasion to put the inmates of a house asleep. Unfortunately the drug was limited in its range and would not penetrate to all the chambers and alcoves of a large edifice like the temple. Moreover it was necessary to wait for a full half hour, with doors or windows opened, till the fumes were dissipated; otherwise the robbers would be overcome together with their victims.

There was also the pollen of a rare jungle lily, which, if cast in a man's face, would induce a temporary paralysis. This too I rejected. There were too many persons to be dealt with, and the pollen could hardly be obtained in sufficient quantities.

At last I decided to consult the magician and alchemist, Veezi Phenquor, who, possessing furnaces and melting-pots, had often served me by converting stolen gold and silver into ingots or other safely unrecognizable forms. Though skeptical of his powers as a magician, I regarded Veezi Phenquor as a skilled pharmacist and toxicologist. Having always on hand a supply of strange and deadly medicaments, he might well be able to provide something that would facilitate our project.

We found Veezi Phenquor decanting one of his more noisome concoctions from a still bubbling and steaming kettle into vials of stout stoneware. By the smell I judged that it must be something of special

potency; the exudations of a polecat would have been innocuous in comparison. In his absorption he did not notice our presence until the entire contents of the kettle had been decanted and the vials tightly stoppered and sealed with a blackish gum.

“That,” he observed with unctuous complacency, “is a love-philter that would inflame a nursing infant or resurrect the powers of a dying nonagenarian. Do you—”

“No,” I said emphatically. “We require nothing of the sort. What we need at the moment is something quite different.” In a few terse words I went on to outline the problem, adding:

“If you can help us, I am sure you will find the melting down of the golden girdles a congenial task. As usual, you will receive a third of the profits.”

Veezi Phenquor creased his bearded face into a half-lubricious, half-sardonic smile.

“The proposition is a pleasant one from all angles. We will free the temple-girls from incumbrances which they must find uncomfortable, not to say burdensome; and will turn the irksome gems and metal to a worthier purpose — notably, our own enrichment.” As if by way of afterthought, he added:

“It happens that I can supply you with a most unusual preparation, warranted to empty the temple of all its occupants in a very short time.”

Going to a cobwebbed corner, he took down from a high shelf an abominous jar of uncolored glass filled with a fine grey powder and brought it to the light.

“I will now,” he said, “explain to you the singular properties of this powder and the way in which it must be used. It is truly a triumph of chemistry, and more devastating than a plague.”

We were astounded by what he told us. Then we began to laugh.

“It is to be hoped,” I said, “that none of your spells and cantrips are involved.”

Veezi Phenquor assumed the expression of one whose feelings have been deeply injured. “I assure you,” he protested, “that the effects of the powder, though extraordinary, are not beyond nature.”

After a moment’s meditation he continued: “I believe that I can further your plan in other ways. After the abstraction of the girdles, there will be the problem of transporting undetected such heavy merchandise across a city which, by that time, may well have been aroused by the horrendous crime and busily patrolled by constabulary. I have a plan...”

We hailed with approval the ingenious scheme outlined by Veezi Phenquor. After we had discussed and settled to our satisfaction the various details, the alchemist brought out certain liquors that proved more palatable than anything of his we had yet sampled. We then returned to our lodgings, I carrying in my cloak the jar of powder, for which Veezi Phenquor generously refused to accept payment. We were filled with the rosiest anticipations of success, together with a modicum of distilled palm-wine.

Discreetly, we refrained from our usual activities during the nights that intervened before the next full moon. We kept closely to our lodgings, hoping that the police, who had long suspected us of numerous peccadilloes, would believe that we had either quitted the city or retired from burglary.

A little before midnight, on the evening of the full moon, Veezi Phenquor knocked discreetly at our door — a triple knock as had been agreed. Like ourselves, he was heavily cloaked in peasant’s homespun.

“I have procured the cart of a vegetable seller from the country,” he said. “It is loaded with seasonable produce and drawn by two small asses. I have

concealed it in the woods, as near to the cave-adit of Leniqua's temple as the overgrown road will permit. Also, I have reconnoitred the cave itself.

"Our success will depend on the utter confusion created. If we are not seen to enter or depart by the rear adit, in all likelihood no one will remember its existence. The priests will be searching elsewhere.

"Having removed the girdles and concealed them under our load of farm produce, we will then wait till the hour before dawn when, with other vegetable and fruit dealers, we will enter the city."

Keeping as far as we could from the public places, where most of the police were gathered around taverns and the cheaper lupanars, we circled across Uzuldaroum and found, at some distance from Leniqua's fane, a road that ran country-ward. The jungle soon grew denser and the houses fewer. No one saw us when we turned into a side road overhung with leaning palms and closed in by thickening brush. After many devious turnings, we came to the ass-drawn cart, so cleverly screened from view that even I could detect its presence only by the pungent aroma of certain root-vegetables. Those asses were well-trained for the use of thieves: there was no braying to betray their presence.

We groped on, over hunching roots and between clustered boles that made the rest of the way impassable for a cart. I should have missed the cave; but Veezi Phenquor, pausing, stooped before a low hillock to part the matted creepers, showing a black and bouldered aperture large enough to admit a man on hands and knees.

Lighting the torches we had brought along, we crawled into the cave, Veezi going first. Luckily, due to the rainless season, the cave was dry and our clothing suffered only earth-stains, such as would be proper to agricultural workers.

The cave narrowed where piles of debris had fallen from the roof. I, with my width and girth, was hard put to squeeze through in places. We had gone an undetermined distance when Veezi stopped and stood erect before a wall of smooth masonry in which shadowy steps mounted.

Vixeela slipped past him and went up the steps. I followed. The fingers of her free hand were gliding over a large flat flagstone that filled the stair-head. The stone began to tilt noiselessly upward. Vixeela blew out her torch and laid it on the top step while the gap widened, permitting a dim, flickering light to pour down from beyond. She peered cautiously over the top of the flag, which became fully uptilted by its hidden mechanism and then climbed through motioning us to follow.

We stood in the shadow of a broad pillar at one side of the back part of Leniqua's temple. No priest, woman or visitor was in sight but we heard a confused humming of voices at some vague remove. Leniqua's image, presenting its reverend rear, sat on a high dais in the center of the nave. Altar fires, golden, blue and green, flamed spasmodically before the god, making his shadow writhe on the floor and against the rear wall like a delirious giant in a dance of copulation with an unseen partner.

Vixeela found and manipulated the spring that caused the flagstone to sink back as part of a level floor. Then the three of us stole forward, keeping in the god's wavering shadow. The nave was still vacant but noise came more audibly from open doorways at one side, resolving itself into gay cries and hysterical laughter.

"Now," whispered Veezi Phenquor.

I drew from a side-pocket the vial he had given us and pried away the wax with a sharp knife. The cork, half-rotten with age, was easily removed. I poured the vial's contents on the back bottom step of Leniqua's dais — a pale stream that quivered and undulated with uncanny life and luster as it

fell in the god's shadow. When the vial was empty I ignited the heap of powder.

It burned instantly with a clear, high-leaping flame. Immediately, it seemed, the air was full of surging phantoms — a soundless, multitudinous explosion, beating upon us, blasting our nostrils with charnel fetors till we reeled before it, choking and strangling. There was however no sense of material impact from the hideous forms that seemed to melt over and through us, rushing in all directions, as if every atom of the burning powder released a separate ghost.

Hastily we covered our noses with squares of thick cloth that Veezi had warned us to bring for this purpose. Something of our usual aplomb returned and we moved forward through the seething rout. Lascivious blue cadavers intertwined around us. Miscegenations of women and tigers arched over us. Monsters double-headed and triple-tailed, goblins and ghouls rose obliquely to the far ceiling or rolled and melted to other and more nameless apparitions in lower air. Green sea-things, like unions of drowned men and octopi coiled and dribbled with dank slime along the floor.

Then we heard the cries of fright from the temple's inmates and visitors and began to meet naked men and women who rushed frantically through that army of beleaguering phantoms toward the exits. Those who encountered us face to face recoiled as if we too were shapes of intolerable horror.

The naked men were mostly young. After them came middle-aged merchants and aldermen, bald and pot-bellied, some clad in undergarments, some in snatched-up cloaks too short to cover them below the hips. Women, lean, fat or buxom, tumbled screaming for the outer doors. None of them, we saw with approbation, had retained her chastity girdle.

Lastly came the priests, with mouths like gaping squares of terror, emitting shrill cries. All of them had dropped their sickles. They passed us, blindly disregarding our presence, and ran after the rest. The host of powder-born specters soon shrouded them from view.

Satisfied that the temple was now empty of its inmates and clients, we turned our attention to the first corridor. The doors of the separate rooms were all open. We divided our labors, taking each a room, and removing from disordered beds and garment-littered floors the cast-off girdles of gold and gems. We met at the corridor's end, where our collected loot was thrust into the strong thin sack I had carried under my cloak. Many of the phantoms still lingered, achieving new and ghastlier fusions, dropping their members upon us as they began to diswreathe.

Soon we had searched all the rooms apportioned to the women. My sack was full, and I had counted thirty-eight girdles at the end of the third corridor. One girdle was still missing; but Vixeela's sharp eyes caught the gleam of an emerald-studded buckle protruding from under the dissolving legs of a hairy satyr-like ghost on a pile of male garments in the corner. She snatched up the girdle and carried it in her hand henceforward.

We hurried back to Leniqua's nave, believing it to be vacant of all human occupants by now. To our disconcertion the High Priest, whose name Vixeela knew as Marquanos, was standing before the altar, striking blows with a long phallic rod of bronze, his insignia of office, at certain apparitions that remained floating in the air.

Marquanos rushed toward us with a harsh cry as we neared him, dealing a blow at Vixeela that would have brained her if she had not slipped agilely to one side. The High Priest staggered, nearly losing his balance. Before he could turn upon her again, Vixeela brought down on his tonsured head the heavy chastity girdle she bore in her right hand. Marquanos toppled like a

slaughtered ox beneath the pole-ax of the butcher, and lay prostrate, writhing a little. Blood ran in rills from the serrated imprint of the great jewels on his scalp. Whether he was dead or still living, we did not pause to ascertain.

We made our exit without delay. After the fright they had received, there was small likelihood that any of the temple's denizens would venture to return for some hours. The movable slab fell smoothly back into place behind us. We hurried along the underground passage, I carrying the sack and the others preceding me in order to drag it through straitened places and over piles of rubble when I was forced to set it down. We reached the creeper-hung entrance without incident. There we paused awhile before emerging into the moon-streaked woods, and listened cautiously to cries that diminished with distance. Apparently no one had thought of the rear adit or had even realized that there was any such human motive as robbery behind the invasion of terrifying specters.

Reassured, we came forth from the cavern and found our way back to the hidden cart and its drowsing asses. We threw enough of the fruits and vegetables into the brush to make a deep cavity in the cart's center in which our sackful of loot was then deposited and covered over from sight. Then, settling ourselves on the grassy ground, we waited for the hour before dawn. Around us after awhile, we heard the furtive slithering and scampering of small animals that devoured the comestibles we had cast away.

If any of us slept, it was, so to speak, with one eye and one ear. We rose in the horizontal sifting of the last moonbeams and long eastward-running shadows of early twilight.

Leading our asses, we approached the highway and stopped behind the brush while an early cart creaked by. Silence ensued, and we broke from the

wood and resumed our journey cityward before other carts came in sight.

In our return through outlying streets we met only a few early passers, who gave us no second glance. Reaching the neighborhood of Veezi Phenquor's house, we consigned the cart to his care and watched him turn into the courtyard unchallenged and seemingly unobserved by others than ourselves. He was, I reflected, well supplied with roots and fruits.

We kept closely to our lodgings for two days. It seemed unwise to remind the police of our presence in Uzuldaroum by any public appearance. On the evening of the second day our food supply ran short and we sallied out in our rural costumes to a nearby market which we had never before patronized.

Returning, we found evidence that Veezi Phenquor had paid us a visit during our absence, in spite of the fact that all the doors and windows had been, and still were, carefully locked. A small cube of gold reposed on the table, serving as paper-weight for a scribbled note.

The note read:

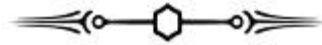
“My esteemed friends and companions: After removing the various gems, I have melted down all the gold into ingots, and am leaving one of them as a token of my great regard. Unfortunately, I have learned that I am being watched by the police and am leaving Uzuldaroum under circumstances of haste and secrecy, taking the other ingots and all the jewels in the ass-drawn cart, covered up by the vegetables I have providentially kept, even though they are slightly stale by now. I expect to make a long journey, in a direction which I cannot specify — a journey well beyond the jurisdiction of our local police, and one on which I trust you will not be perspicacious enough to follow me. I shall need the remainder of our loot for my expenses, et cetera. Good luck in all your future ventures. Respectfully, *Veezi Phenquor*.

“POSTSCRIPT: You too are being watched, and I advise you to quit the city with all feasible expedition. Marquanos, in spite of a well-cracked mazzard from Vixeela’s blow, recovered full consciousness late yesterday. He recognized in Vixeela a former temple-girl through the trained dexterity of her movements. He has not been able to identify her; but a thorough and secret search is being made, and other girls have already been put to the thumb-screw and toe-screw by Leniqua’s priests.

“You and I, my dear Satampira, have already been listed, though not yet identified, as possible accomplices of the girl. A man of your conspicuous height and bulk is being sought. The Powder of the Fetid Apparitions, some traces of which were found on Leniqua’s dais, has already been analyzed. Unluckily it has been used before both by myself and other alchemists.

“I hope you will escape... on other paths than the one I am planning to follow.”

The Tomb-Spawn



EVENING HAD COME from the desert into Faraad, bringing the last stragglers of caravans. In a wine-shop near the northern gate, many traveling merchants from outer lands, parched and weary, were refreshing themselves with the famed vintages of Yoros. To divert them from their fatigue, a story-teller spoke amid the clinking of the wine-cups:

“Great was Ossaru, being both king and wizard. He ruled over half the continent of Zothique. His armies were like the rolling sands, blown by the simoom. He commanded the genii of storm and of darkness, he called down the spirits of the sun. Men knew his wizardry as the green cedars know the blasting of levin.

“Half immortal, he lived from age to age, waxing in his wisdom and power till the end. Thasaidon, black god of evil, prospered his every spell and enterprise. And during his latter years he was companioned by the monster Nioth Korghai, who came down to Earth from an alien world, riding a fire-maned comet.

“Ossaru, by his skill in astrology, had foreseen the coming of Nioth Korghai. Alone, he went forth into the desert to await the monster, in many lands people saw the falling of the comet, like a sun that came down by night upon the waste; but only King Ossaru beheld the arrival of Nioth Korghai. He returned in the black, moonless hours before dawn when all men slept, bringing the strange monster to his palace, and housing him in a vault beneath the throne-room, which he had prepared for Nioth Korghai’s abode.

“Dwelling always thereafter in the vault, the monster remained unknown and unbeheld. It was said that he gave advice to Ossaru, and instructed him in the lore of the outer planets. At certain periods of the stars, women and young warriors were sent down as a sacrifice to Nioth Korghai; and these returned never to give account of that which they had seen. None could surmise his aspect; but all who entered the palace heard ever in the vault beneath a muffled noise as of slow beaten drums, and a regurgitation such as would be made by an underground fountain; and sometimes men heard an evil cackling as of a mad cockatrice.

“For many years King Ossaru was served by Nioth Korghai, and gave service to the monster in return. Then Nioth Korghai sickened with a strange malady, and men heard no more the cackling in the sunken vault; and the noises of drums and fountain-mouths grew fainter, and ceased. The spells of the wizard king were powerless to avert his death; but when the monster had died, Ossaru surrounded his body with a double zone of enchantment, circle by circle, and closed the vault. And later, when Ossaru died, the vault was opened from above, and the king’s mummy was lowered therein by his slaves, to repose forever beside that which remained of Nioth Korghai.

“Cycles have gone by since then; and Ossaru is but a name on the lips of story-tellers. Lost now is the palace wherein he dwelt, and the city thereabout, some saying that it stood in Yoros, and some, in the empire of Cincor, where Yethlyreom was later built by the Nimboth dynasty. And this alone is certain, that somewhere still, in the sealed tomb, the alien monster abides in death, together with King Ossaru. And about them still is the inner circle of Ossaru’s enchantment, rendering their bodies incorruptible throughout all the decay of cities and kingdoms; and around this is another circle, guarding against all intrusion; since he who enters there by the

tomb's door will die instantly and will putrefy in the moment of death, falling to dusty corruption ere he strike the ground.

“Such is the legend of Ossaru and Nioth Korghai. No man has ever found their tomb; but the wizard Namirrha, prophesying darkly, foretold many ages ago that certain travelers, passing through the desert, would some day come upon it unaware. And he said that these travelers, descending into the tomb by another way than the door, would behold a strange prodigy. And he spoke not concerning the nature of the prodigy, but said only that Nioth Korghai, being a creature from some far world, was obedient to alien laws in death as in life. And of that which Namirrha meant, no man has yet guessed the secret.”

The brothers Milab and Marabac, who were jewel-merchants from Ustaim, had listened raptly to the storyteller.

“Now truly this is a strange tale,” said Milab. “However, as all men know, there were great wizards in the olden days, workers of deep enchantment and wonder; and also there were true prophets. And the sands of Zothique are full of lost tombs and cities.”

“It is a good story,” said Marabac, “but it lacks an ending. Prithée, O teller of tales, canst tell us no more than this? Was there no treasure of precious metals and jewels entombed with the monster and the king? I have seen sepulchers where the dead were walled with gold ingots, arid sarcophagi that poured forth rubies like the gouted blood of vampires.”

“I relate the legend as my fathers told it,” affirmed the story-teller. “They who are destined to find the tomb must tell the rest — if haply they return from the finding.”

Milab and Marabac had traded their store of uncut jewels, of carver, talismans and small jasper and carnelian idols, making a good profit in Faraad. Now, laden with rosy and purple-black pearls from the southern

gulfs, and the black sapphires and winy garnets of Yoros, they were returning northward toward Tasuun with a company of other merchants on the long, circuitous journey to Ustaim by the orient sea.

The way had led through a dying land. Now, as the caravan approached the borders of Yoros, the desert began to assume a profounder desolation. The hills were dark and lean, like recumbent mummies of giants. Dry water-ways ran down to lake-bottoms leprous with salt. Billows of grey sand were driven high on the crumbling cliffs, where gentle waters had once rippled. Columns of dust arose and went by like fugitive phantoms. Over all, the sun was a monstrous ember in a charred heaven.

Into this waste, which was seemingly unpeopled and void of life, the caravan went warily. Urging their camels to a swift trot in the narrow, deep-walled ravines, the merchants made ready their spears and claymores and scanned the barren ridges with anxious eyes. For here, in hidden caves, there lurked a wild and half-bestial people, known as the Ghorii. Akin to the ghouls and jackals, they were eaters of carrion; and also they were anthropophagi, subsisting by preference on the bodies of travelers, and drinking their blood in lieu of water or wine. They were dreaded by all who had occasion to journey between Yoros and Tasuun.

The sun climbed to its meridian, searching with ruthless beams the nethermost umbrage of the strait, deep defiles. The fine ash-light sand was no longer stirred by any puff of wind. No lizards lifted or scurried on the rocks.

Now the road ran downward, following the course of some olden stream between acclivitous banks. Here, in lieu of former pools, there were pits of sand dammed up by riffles or boulders, in which the camels floundered knee-deep. And here, without the least warning, in a turn of the sinuous bed, the gully swarmed and seethed with the hideous earth-brown bodies of the

Ghorii, who appeared instantaneously on all sides, leaping wolfishly from the rocky slopes or flinging themselves like panthers from the high ledges.

These ghoulish apparitions were unspeakably ferocious and agile. Uttering no sound, other than a sort of hoarse coughing and spitting, and armed only with their double rows of pointed teeth and their sickle — like talons, they poured over the caravan in a climbing wave. It seemed that there were scores of them to each man and camel. Several of the dromedaries were thrown to earth at once, with the Ghorii gnawing their legs and haunches and chines, or hanging dog-wise at their throats. They and their drivers were buried from sight by the ravenous monsters, who began to devour them immediately. Boxes of jewels and bales of rich fabrics were tom open in the melee, jasper and onyx idols were strewn ignominiously in the dust, pearls and rubies, unheeded, lay weltering in puddled blood; for these things were of no value to the Ghorii.

Milab and Marabac, as it happened, were riding at the rear. They had lagged behind, somewhat against their will, since the camel ridden by Milab had gone lame from a stone-bruise; and thus, by good for-tune, they evaded the ghoulish onset. Pausing aghast, they beheld the fate of their companions, whose resistance was overcome with horrible quickness. The Ghorii, however, did not perceive Milab and Marabac, being wholly intent on devouring the camels and merchants they had dragged down, as well as those members of their own band that were wounded by the swords and lances of the travelers.

The two brothers, levelling their spears, would have ridden for-ward to perish bravely and uselessly with their fellows. But, terrified by the hideous tumult, by the odor of blood and the hyena-like scent of the Ghorii, their dromedaries balked and bolted, carrying them back along the route into Yoros.

During this unpremeditated flight they soon saw another band of the Ghorii, who had appeared far off on the southern slopes and were running to intercept them. To avoid this new peril Milab and Marabac turned their camels into a side ravine. Traveling slowly because of the lameness of Milab's dromedary, and thinking to find the swift Ghorii on their heels at any moment, they went eastward for many miles with the sun lowering behind them, and came at mid-afternoon to the low and rainless water-shed of that immemorial region.

Here they looked out over a sunken plain, wrinkled and eroded, where the white walls and domes of some innominate city gleamed. It appeared to Milab and Marabac that the city was only a few leagues away. Deeming they had sighted some hidden town of the outer sands, and hopeful now of escaping their pursuers, they began the descent of the long slope toward the plain.

For two days, on a powdery terrain that was like the bituminous dust of mummies, they traveled toward the ever-receding domes that had seemed so near. Their plight became desperate; for between them they possessed only a handful of dried apricots and a water-bag that was three-fourths empty. Their provisions, together with their stock of jewels and carvings, had been lost with the pack-dromedaries of the caravan. Apparently there was no pursuit from the Ghorii; but about them there gathered the red demons of thirst, the black demons of hunger. On the second morning Milab's camel refused to rise and would not respond either to the cursing of its master or the prodding of his spear. Thereafter, the two shared the remaining camel, riding together or by turns.

Often they lost sight of the gleaming city, which appeared and disappeared like a mirage. But an hour before sunset, on the second day,

they followed the far-thrown shadows of broken obelisks and crumbling watch-towers into the olden streets.

The place had once been a metropolis; but now many of its lordly mansions were scattered shards or heaps of downfallen blocks. Great dunes of sand had poured in through proud triumphal arches, had filled the pavements and courtyards. Lurching with exhaustion, and sick at heart with the failure of their hope, Milab and Marabac went on, searching everywhere for some well or cistern that the long desert years had haply spared.

In the city's heart, where the walls of temples and lofty buildings of state still served as a barrier to the engulfing sand, they found the ruins of an old aqueduct, leading to cisterns dry as furnaces. There were dust-choked fountains in the market places; but nowhere was there anything to betoken the presence of water.

Wandering hopelessly on, they came to the ruins of a huge edifice which, it appeared, had been the palace of some forgotten monarch. The mighty walls, defying the erosion of ages, were still extant. The portals, guarded on either hand by green brazen images of mythic he-roes, still frowned with unbroken arches. Mounting the marble steps, the jewelers entered a vast, roofless hall where cyclopean columns towered as if to bear up the desert sky.

The broad pavement flags were mounded with debris of arches and architraves and pilasters. At the hall's far extreme there was a dais of black-veined marble on which, presumably, a royal throne had once reared. Nearing the dais, Milab and Marabac both heard a low and indistinct gurgling as of some hidden stream or fountain, that appeared to rise from underground depths below the palace pavement.

Eagerly trying to locate the source of the sound, they climbed the dais. Here a huge block had fallen from the wall above, perhaps recently and the

marble had cracked beneath its weight, and a portion of the dais had broken through into some underlying vault, leaving a dark and jagged aperture. It was from this opening that the water-like regurgitation rose, incessant and regular as the beating of a pulse.

The jewelers leaned above the pit, and peered down into webby darkness shot with a doubtful glimmering that came from an indiscernible source. They could see nothing. A dank and musty odor touched their nostrils, like the breath of some long-sealed reservoir. It seemed to them that the steady fountain-like noise was only a few feet below in the shadows, a little to one side of the opening.

Neither of them could determine the depth of the vault. After a brief consultation they returned to their camel, which was waiting stolidly at the palace entrance; and removing the camel's harness they knot-ted the long reins and leather body-bands into a single thong that would serve them in lieu of rope. Going back to the dais, they secured one end of this thong to the fallen block, and lowered the other into the dark pit.

Milab descended hand over hand into the depths for ten or twelve feet before his toes encountered a solid surface. Stiff gripping the thong cautiously, he found himself on a level floor of stone. The day was fast waning beyond the palace walls; but a wan glimmer was afforded by the hole in the pavement above; and the outlines of a half-open door, sagging at a ruinous angle, were revealed at one side by the feeble twilight that entered the vault from unknown crypts or stairs beyond.

While Marabac came nimbly down to join him, Milab peered about for the source of the water-like noise. Before him in the undetermined shadows he discerned the dim and puzzling contours of an object that he could liken only to some enormous clepsydra or fountain surrounded with grotesque carvings.

The light seemed to fail momentary. Unable to decide the nature of the object, and having neither torch nor candle, he tore a strip from the hem of his hempen burnoose, and lit the slow-burning cloth and held it aloft at arm's length before him. By the dull, smouldering luminance thus obtained, the jewelers beheld more clearly the thing that bulked prodigious and monstrous, rearing above them from the fragment-littered floor to the shadowy roof.

The thing was like some blasphemous dream of a mad devil. Its main portion or body was urn-like in form and was pedestalled on a queerly tilted block of stone at the vault's center. It was palish and pitted with innumerable small apertures. From its bosom and flattened base many arm-like and leg-like projections trailed in swollen nightmare segments to the ground; and two other members, sloping tautly, reached down like roots into an open and seemingly empty sarcophagus of gilded metal, graven with weird archaic ciphers, that stood beside the block.

The urn-shaped torso was endowed with two heads. One of these heads was beaked like a cuttlefish and was lined with long oblique slits where the eyes should have been. The other head, in close juxtaposition on the narrow shoulders, was that of an aged man dark and regal and terrible, whose burning eyes were like balas-rubies and whose grizzled beard had grown to the length of jungle moss on the loathsomely porous trunk. This trunk, on the side below the human head, displayed a faint outline as of ribs; and some of the members ended in human hands and feet, or possessed anthropomorphic jointings.

Through heads, limbs and body there ran recurrently the mysterious noise of regurgitation that had drawn Milab and Marabac to enter the vault. At each repetition of the sound a slimy dew exuded from the monstrous pores and rilled sluggishly down in endless drops.

The jewelers were held speechless and immobile by a clammy terror. Unable to avert their gaze, they met the baleful eyes of the human head, glaring upon them from its unearthly eminence. Then, as the hempen strip in Milab's fingers burned slowly away and failed to a red smoulder, and darkness gathered again in the vault, they saw the blind slits in the other head open gradually, pouring forth a hot, yellow, intolerably flaming light as they expanded to immense round orbits. At the same time they heard a singular drum-like throbbing, as if the heart of the huge monster had become audible.

They knew only that a strange horror not of earth or but partially of earth, was before them. The sight deprived them of thought and memory. Least of all did they remember the storyteller in Faraad, and the tale he had told concerning the hidden tomb of Ossaru and Nioth Korghai, and the prophecy of the tomb's finding by those who should come to it unaware.

Swiftly, with a dreadful stretching and straightening, the monster lifted its foremost members, ending in the brown, shrivelled hands of an old man, and reached out toward the jewelers. From the cuttlefish beak there issued a shrill demonian cackling; from the mouth of the kingly greybeard head a sonorous voice began to utter words of solemn cadence, like some enchanter's rune, in a tongue unknown to Milab and Marabac.

They recoiled before the abhorrently groping hands. In a frenzy of fear and panic, by the streaming light of its incandescent orbs, they saw the anomaly rise and lumber forward from its stone seat, walking clumsily and uncertainly on its ill-assorted members. There was a trampling of elephantine pads-and a stumbling of human feet inadequate to bear up their share of the blasphemous hulk. The two stiffly sloping tentacles were withdrawn from the gold sarcophagus, their ends muffled by empty, jewel-sewn cloths of a precious purple, such as would be used for the winding of

some royal mummy. With a ceaseless and insane cackling, a malign thundering as of curses that broke to senile quavers, the double-headed horror leaned toward Milab and Marabac.

Turning, they ran wildly across the roomy vault. Before them, illumined now by the pouring rays from the monster's orbits, they saw the half-open door of somber metal whose bolts and hinges had rusted away, permitting it to sag inward. The door was of cyclopean height and breadth, as if designed for beings huger than man. Beyond it were the dim reaches of a twilight corridor.

Five paces from the doorway there was a faint red line that followed the chamber's conformation on the dusty floor. Marabac, a little ahead of his brother, crossed the line. As if checked in mid-air by some invisible wall, he faltered and stopped. His limbs and body seemed to melt away beneath the burnoose — the burnoose itself became tattered as with incalculable age. Dust floated on the air in a tenuous cloud, and there was a momentary gleaming of white bones where his outflung hands had been. Then the bones too were gone — and an empty heap of rags lay rotting on the floor.

A faint odor as of corruption rose to the nostrils of Milab. Uncomprehending, he had checked his own flight for an instant. Then, on his shoulders, he felt the grasp of slimy, withered hands. The cackling and muttering of the heads was like a demon chorus behind him. The drum-like beating, the noise of rising fountains, were loud in his ears. With one swiftly dying scream he followed Marabac over the red line.

The enormity that was both man and star-born monster, the name-less amalgam of an unearthly resurrection, stiff lumbered on and did not pause. With the hands of that Ossaru who had forgotten his own enchantment, it reached for the two piles of empty rags. Reaching, it entered the zone of death and dissolution which Ossaru himself had established to guard the

vault forever. For an instant, on the air, there was a melting as of misshapen cloud, a falling as of light ashes. After that the darkness returned, and with the darkness, silence.

Night settled above that nameless land, that forgotten city; and with its coming the Ghorii, who had followed Milab and Marabac over the desert plain. Swiftly they slew and ate the camel that waited patiently at the palace entrance. Later, in the old hall of columns, they found that opening in the dais through which the jewelers had descended. Hungrily they gathered about the hole, sniffing at the tomb beneath. Then, baffled, they went away, their keen nostrils telling them that the scent was lost, that the tomb was empty either of life or death.

Other Dimensions (1970)



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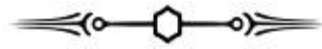
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“I’M GOING TO put you fellows off on the first world of the first planetary system we come to.”

The icy deliberation of Captain Volmar’s tones was more terrible than any show of anger would have been. His eyes were chill and sharp as the sapphire lights in snow; and there was a fanatic rigor in the tightening of his lips after the curtly spoken words.

The three mutineers looked sullenly at each other and at the captain, but said nothing. The leveled automatics of Volmar and the three other members of the space-flier’s crew made all appeal or argument seem absurd. They knew that there could be no relenting on the part of that thin, austere mariner of the interstellar gulfs, who had dreamt of circumnavigating space and thus becoming the Magellan of the constellations.

For five years he had driven the great vessel further and further away from the earth and the solar system, which had long ago dwindled into points of telescopic light — for five years he had hurled it onward at more than the speed of cosmic rays, through the shoreless, bottomless night, among the shifting stars and nebulae. The configuration of the skies had changed beyond all recognition; the Signs were no longer those that are known to terrestrial astronomers; far-off stars had leapt into blazing suns and had faded back to stars; and there had been a flying glimpse of stranger planets. And year by year the cold terror of the endless deeps, the vertiginous horror of untold infinitude, had crept like a slow paralysis upon the souls of the three men; and a nostalgia for the distant earth had swept them with unutterable sickness; till they could bear it no longer, and had

made their hasty, ill-planned attempt to secure control of the vessel and turn it homeward.

There had been a brief, desperate struggle. Forewarned by a subtle instinct, Volmar had suspected them and had been in readiness; and he and the men loyal to him had armed themselves furtively in preparation, while the others had made their attack bare-handed, man to man. All of the mutineers were wounded, though not seriously, before they could be subdued; and blood dripped from their wounds on the floor of the flier, as they stood before Volmar.

Albert Adams, Chester Deming and James Roverton were the names of the mutineers. Adams and Deming were quite young, and Roverton was now verging upon early middle-age. Their very presence in Volmar's crew was proof of intellectual ability and prime physical fitness, for all had been subjected to examinations of the most rigorous and prolonged order. A high knowledge of mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and other branches of science had been required, as well as a mastery of mechanics; and perfect sight, hearing, equilibrium and a flawless constitution were likewise requisite. Also, it goes without saying that they belonged to a most active, adventurous type: for no ordinary men would even have volunteered for such a project as Volmar's. Innumerable voyages had already been made to the moon and the nearer planets; but, previous to this, aside from the one trip made to Alpha Centauri by the Allen Farquhar expedition, no one had dared the outer deep and the constellations.

Volmar and the three who had remained faithful to him were all of the same breed: men of religious, well-nigh inhuman devotion to an idea, scientists to whom nothing mattered apart from science, who were capable of martyring themselves and others if by so doing they could prove a theory or make a discovery. And in Volmar himself there was a spirit of mad

adventure, a desire to tread where no man had been before; the cold flame of an imperial lust for unexplored immensitude. The mutineers were more human; and the years of bleak confinement in the space-flier, among the terrific pits of infinity, remote from all that is life to normal beings, had broken down their morale in the end. Few, perhaps, could have endured it as long as they.

“Another thing,” the chill voice of Volmar went on: “I shall put you off without weapons, provisions or oxygen-tanks. You will have to shift for yourselves — and of course, the chances are that the atmosphere, if there is any, will prove unfit for human respiration. Jasper will now proceed to truss you up, so that there won’t be any more foolishness.”

Alton Jasper, a well-known astronomer, who was first mate of the flier, stepped forward and bound the hands of the mutineers behind them with rope. Then they were locked in a lower apartment of the vessel, above the manhole that gave entrance and egress. This apartment was insulated from all the rest; and the manhole could be opened from the higher rooms by means of an electrical device. There the mutineers lay in absolute darkness, except when someone entered with a meager allotment of food and drink.

Aeons seemed to pass, and the three men abandoned all efforts to keep a reckoning of time. They spoke little, for there was nothing to speak of but failure and despair and the dreadful unknown fate ahead of them. Sometimes one of them, particularly Roverton, would gallantly try to crack a jest; but the laughter that answered the jest was the last flare of a courage tried almost beyond human endurance.

One day, they heard the voice of Volmar addressing them through the speaking-tube. It was far-off and high and thin, like a voice from some sidereal altitude.

“We are now approaching Delta Andromedae,” the voice announced. “It has a planetary system, for two worlds have already been sighted. We shall make a landing, and put you off on the nearest one, in about two hours.”

The mutineers felt a sense of comparative relief. Anything, even sudden death from the inhalation of some irrespirable atmosphere, would be better than the long confinement. Stoically, like condemned criminals, they prepared themselves for the fatal plunge into the unknown.

The black minutes ebbed away, and then the electric lights were turned on. The door opened, and Jasper came in. He removed the bonds of the three men in silence; then he retired, and the door was locked upon them for the last time.

They were aware, somehow, that the flier had slackened its speed. They tried to stand up, with their stiffened limbs, and found it hard to maintain their equilibrium, for they had long been habituated to a rate of movement far beyond that of any cosmic body. Then they were aware that the vessel had stopped: there was a sudden jolt that flung them against the wall, and a cessation of the engines’ eternal drone. The silence was very strange, for the throbbing of the great electromagnetic motors had long been as familiar to them as the beating of their own blood.

The manhole opened with a harsh, metallic screech, and there was a faint glimmering of bluish-green light from without. Then there came a gust of acrid air, and a waft of indescribable smells that were unlike anything on earth. The mutineers heard the voice of Volmar once more:

“Out with you — and make it quick. I’ve no more time to waste on rubbish.”

Holding his breath, Roverton approached the manhole, crawled through, and climbed down the steel ladder that ran along the outer side of the flier. The others followed him in turn. They could see little, for apparently it was

night in the new world on which they were being landed. They seemed to hang over an indefinite abyss with no bottom, but on reaching the end of the ladder, they found solid earth beneath their feet. The air, though sharp and unpleasant to the nostrils, was apparently breathable. They took a few careful steps, keeping close together, on a surface that was smooth and level to their tread. While they were trying to adjust their senses to the dim surrounding, they saw the vague bulk of the flier begin to move, and then heard the prodigious roar of its ascent to the skies.

“Marooned!” said Roverton, with a short laugh. “Well, there’s one safe bet — we’re the first mutineers who have ever been put off in Andromeda. I vote that we make the most of the experience. The air hasn’t killed us yet, so evidently it contains a proportion of hydrogen and oxygen not too dissimilar from that of the earth’s atmosphere. And, with such air, there is a good chance of finding plant-life, or even animal-life, of types that will afford edible substances.”

The three men peered about, straining their eyes in an effort to penetrate the blue-green darkness. None of them was unimaginative; and they felt the thrill of an eeriness beyond all parallel, an overpowering strangeness that preyed upon their nerves with a million intimations of unrevealed and formless things never before conceived by man. Their situation was unthinkably desolate; but behind the desolation there seemed to lurk the multitudinous and multiform teeming of unearthly life. However, they could see nothing tangible, except some vague unmoving masses that resembled large boulders. The air was a little chill, and its acrid character became more noticeable, in unison with a peculiar darkness.

The skies above were faint and vaporous, with a few stars glowing dully in their depths. Some of the stars were momentarily obscured then disclosed, as if there were some movement or change in the occluding

medium. Everywhere there was the sense of abysmal and immeasurable distance; and the mutineers were conscious of an odd, terrific vertigo, as if the horizontal spaces on all sides might draw them in like some unfathomable gulf.

Roverton stepped forward toward one of the boulder-like masses, taking careful note of the gravitational pull exerted by the ground. He was not quite sure, but thought that he experienced a sense of weight, of difficulty in locomotion, slightly beyond that which is felt on our earth

“I think this world is a little larger or heavier than our own,” he announced. The others followed him, and were aware of like sensations. They stopped uncertainly, wondering what was to be done next.

“I suppose the sun will rise some time,” observed Deming. “Delta Andromedae is a sizable affair, and seemingly the warmth it affords is comparable to that of our sun. Doubtless it will yield a similar illumination. In the meanwhile we might as well sit down and wait, if this is a bona fide boulder.”

He seated himself on the dark mass, which was almost circular in form and was perhaps eight feet in diameter by three in height, with a gently rounded top. The others followed suit. The object seemed to be covered with a sort of thick, shaggy, resilient moss.

“This is luxury,” exclaimed Roverton. “I’d like to take a nap.” Neither he nor any of the others, however, was in any state to permit of slumber. All were ungovernably excited by the novelty of their position, and were aware of a terrible disquietude, a wild nervousness due to the shock of being plunged among alien atmospheric and geologic forces, the magnetic emanations of a soil untrod by human foot. Of this soil itself they could determine nothing, except that it was moist and was apparently devoid of grass or plant-forms.

They waited. The darkness was like the slow oozing of a cold, glaucous eternity. The mutineers carried watches, which perforce had run down during their period of incarceration. They wound and set these watches going, and struck a match occasionally to note the passage of time — a proceeding which struck them all with its absurdity, since there was no means of knowing whether or not the twenty-four hours of the terrestrial day would correspond in any manner to the diurnal period of this new world.

Hours dragged on. They talked with sporadic and feverish loquacity in an effort to fight down the nervousness of which all were uncontrollably conscious. Strong and mature men though they were, they felt at times like children alone in the dark, with a horde of monstrous unknown terrors pressing about them. When silence fell, the unformulable weirdness and horror of the environing gloom seemed to draw closer; and they dared not be still for very long. The hush of the dim heavens and the dimmer ground was oppressive with unimaginable menace. Once, they heard a far-off sound, like the whirring and jarring of a rusty crank. It soon ceased, and was not repeated; but at long intervals there were sharp, tiny stridulations, like those of insects, which appeared to come from the nearer distance. They were so high and harsh that the teeth of the three men were actually set on edge by them.

Suddenly, they all perceived that the darkness was beginning to lighten. A chill glimmering crept along the ground, and the boulder-like masses defined themselves more clearly. The light was very peculiar, for it appeared to emanate from the soil and to tremble upward in visible waves like those of heat. It was faintly iridescent, like the nimbus of a cloudy moon; and, gathering strength, it soon became comparable to earthly moonlight in its illuminative power. Beneath it, the soil displayed a

greenish-grey color and a consistency resembling half-dried clay. The sides of the boulder-forms were plainly lit, though their tops remained in shadow. The moss-like substance covering them was of a purple hue, and was very long and coarse and hairy.

The mutineers were greatly puzzled by the light. "Is it some sort of radioactivity?" queried Roverton. "Is it phosphorescence? Is it due to some luminous micro-organism — a kind of *noctiluca*?"

He stooped down and peered closely at the trembling waves of iridescence. He gave an exclamation. The light, as it rose, seemed to be full of infinitesimal motes, which hovered about a foot from the ground at their highest flight. They poured unceasingly to this level in teeming millions.

"Animaculae of some unknown kind," decided Roverton. "Evidently their bodies are highly luminescent—one could almost read a book by this light." He took out his watch and found that the figures were clearly distinguishable.

After awhile the weird luminosity began to subside, and ebbed along the soil as it had come. The re-established darkness, however, was not of long duration. Soon the landscape declared its outlines again; and this time the illumination came in a normal manner, like the twilight of a misty dawn. A plain with barely perceptible undulations, and having scores of the boulder-forms scattered about it, was now visible for some distance, till it was lost among the streamers of curling vapor that rose all about. A sluggish, leaden-colored stream ran through the plain, about two hundred feet from where Roverton and his fellows were sitting, and vanished in the mist. Soon the vapors, hueless at first, were tinged with deepening colors — pink and saffron and heliotrope and purple — as if an aurora were rising behind them. There was a brightening in the center of this prismatic display; and it was surmised that the solar body, Delta Andromedae, had now ascended

above the horizon. The air grew rapidly warmer. Seeing the nearby stream, the men all realized that they were excessively thirsty. Of course, the water might not be drinkable; but they decided to chance it. The fluid was peculiarly thick, milky and opaque. The taste was a trifle brackish; but nevertheless, it allayed their thirst; and they felt no immediate ill-effects.

“Now for breakfast, if we can find it,” said Roverton. “We lack nothing but food-stuffs, utensils and fuel.”

“I can’t see that we’ll find any by staying where we are,” observed Adams. “Of all the desolate holes! Let’s go.” A discussion arose as to which direction they should take. They all sat down again on one of the mossy purple masses, to decide the momentous problem. The landscape was equally barren and dreary on all sides; but at last they agreed to follow the flowing of the leaden stream, which ran toward the auroral display. They were about to rise, when the boulder-form on which they were sitting seemed to heave upward suddenly. Adams found himself sprawling on the ground, but the other two were quick enough to save themselves from a like fate. Startled, they leapt away; and turning back, they saw that the great mass had opened, as if cloven through the center, revealing an immense hollow lined with a whitish material that resembled the interior of an animal’s stomach. The material trembled incessantly, and a glutinous liquid welled from within it, like saliva or digestive fluid.

“Heavens!” ejaculated Roverton. “Who ever dreamt of anything like that? Is it plant, animal, or both?”

He approached the mass, which gave no sign of movement apart from the trembling. Apparently it was rooted, or deeply embedded in the ground. As he drew near, the production of the glutinous liquid became more copious.

A sharp stridulation, similar to the noises heard during the night, was now audible. Turning, the mutineers saw a most singular creature flying toward them. It was large as a Chinese teal, but presented the general appearance of an insect rather than a bird. It had four large, pointed, membranous wings, a fat grub-like body marked off into segments, a thin head with two black periscope-like attachments rising above it, a dozen long intricate antennae, and a greenish-yellow beak shaped like that of a parrot. The body and head were a loathsome verminous gray. The thing flew past Roverton and lit on the substance he had been inspecting. Crouching down on four short, rudimentary legs, it started to sip the fluid with its beak, trailing its wings as it did so. The fluid welled as if in waves, and the wings and body of the creature were soon glistening with slime. Presently it ceased to sip, its head sank in the fluid, it struggled feebly to free itself, and then lay still.

“Ugh!” said Deming. “So that’s the idea. A sort of Andromedan pitcher-plant or fly-trap. If the flies are all like that we’ll need tennis-rackets for swatters.”

As he spoke, three more of the insect creatures flew past, and began to repeat the actions and the fate of their predecessor. No sooner were they securely imprisoned, when the shaggy mass proceeded to close itself till the white lining was no longer discernible. The cleavage where it had opened could barely be detected; and once more the thing presented the appearance of a mossy boulder. Looking about, the mutineers saw that others of the purple masses had opened and were awaiting their victims.

“Those things could easily devour a man,” meditated Roverton. “I’d hate to be caught in one of them. Let’s get out of this if there is a way out.”

He led the way along the sluggish stream. As they went, they saw many more of the gigantic flying insects, which paid no apparent attention to

them. After they had gone a few hundred yards, Roverton almost trod on a black creature shaped like an enormous blindworm, which was crawling away from the stream. It was three feet long. Its movements were extremely torpid, and the men passed it with a shudder of repulsion, for the thing was more loathsome than either a snake or a worm

“What’s that?” Roverton had stopped, and was listening. The others also paused and listened intently. They all heard the sound of dull, muffled blows, at an indeterminate distance in the fog. The sound was quite rhythmic in its repetition, but ceased at intervals. When it stopped, there was a sharp, shrill, multitudinous cheeping.

“Shall we go on ?” Roverton had lowered his voice cautiously. “We’re without weapons; and hell knows what we’ll get into. We may find intelligent beings; but there’s no means of knowing beforehand whether or not they will prove hostile.”

Before his companions could answer, the fog parted and revealed a singular spectacle. No more than a hundred yards down the stream, a dozen pygmy-like beings, about two feet in height, were gathered around one of the purple masses. With instruments whose general form suggested knives and axes, they were cutting away the moss-like integument from the mass and hewing great slabs of the white fleshy material within. Even at that distance, it could be seen that the mass was quivering convulsively, as if it felt their blows.

Suddenly the hewing was suspended. Once more the cheeping sound arose. The pygmies all turned and seemed to be gazing toward Roverton and his companions. Then the sound changed and took on a high, chirping note, like a summons. As if in answer, three monstrous creatures appeared from the fog. Each of them was twenty feet in length, they were like fat lizards in their general form and had an indefinite number of very short legs

on which they crawled or waddled with amazing swiftness. Each of them had four saddles of a fantastic type arranged at intervals along its back. They crouched down, as if at a word of command, and all the pygmies swung themselves with incredible celerity into the saddles. Then, to an accompaniment of shrill pitterings, the unearthly cavalcade advanced upon the travelers. There was no time to even think of fleeing. The speed of the lizard-creatures was far beyond that of the fleetest runner: in a few instants they loomed upon the three men, surrounding them and hemming them in with their mammoth length. The creatures were both grotesque and terrible, with their squat, toadlike heads and their puffed bodies mottled in sinister designs with dull blues and rusty blacks and clayish yellows. Each of them had a single bulging eye that glowed with a ruddy phosphorescence in the middle of its face. Their ears, or what appeared to be such, drooped along their jowls in wrinkled folds and hung down like wattles.

Their riders, seen close at hand, were equally bizarre and hideous. Their heads were large and globular, they were cyclops-eyed, but possessed two mouths, one on each side of an appendage like the trunk of an elephant, which depended almost to their feet. Their arms and legs were of the normal number, but seemed to be very supple and boneless, or else had a bone-structure radically different from that of earth-vertebrates. Their hands were four-fingered and were webbed with translucent membranes. Their feet were also webbed, and terminated in long, curving claws. They were altogether naked; were seemingly hairless; and their skin displayed a leaden pallor. The weapons they carried were made of some purplish metal, colored like permanganate of potash. Some were halberds with short handles; and others were crescent-shaped knives weighted at the top of the blade with heavy knobs.

“God !” cried Roverton. “If we only had elephant-guns and automatics !”

The pygmies had stopped their mounts and were gibbering excitedly as they stared with their round orbs at the earth-beings. The sounds they made were scarcely to be duplicated by human vocal chords.

“Mlah! mlah! knurhp! anhkla! hka! lkai! rhpai!” they chattered to each other.

“I guess we’re as much of a novelty to them as they are to us,” observed Adams.

The pygmies seemed to have arrived at a definite decision. They waved their weapons and chirped, and their lizard-steeds swung round in a semi-circle till all were in a position upstream from the mutineers. They advanced, and the pygmies pointed onward with their weighted knives and halberds as if enjoining the men to precede them. There was nothing to do but obey, for the lizard-creatures opened yawning mouths that were fanged like caverns of stalactites and stalagmites, when they drew near. Roverton and his fellows were forced to proceed at a marathon-like pace in order to keep ahead of them.

“They’re herding us like cattle !” Roverton cried.

When they came abreast of the purple-covered mass which the pygmies had been hewing into slabs, a halt was made and the slabs were loaded into large panniers which were then attached to the backs of the monsters by means of a curious harness that looked as if it were wrought of animal intestines. The men were herded in the center of the cavalcade while this work was going on. There was no possible escape; and they resigned themselves with as much scientific calm as they could muster.

After the loading had been accomplished, the pygmies resumed their advance along the stream, driving their captives before them. The fog had now begun to lift and disappear, and a dim yellow solar orb, slightly larger than our sun, became discernible low in the heavens above a remote horizon

of serrate peaks. The river turned abruptly after a mile or so and wound away through the desolate plain toward a large lake or sea that filled the further distance with a semi-hue of dull purple. Here the cavalcade left the stream, marshalling its prisoners towards the far-off mountains.

The landscape grew barer and even more desert-like in its character as Roverton and his companions stumbled onward before the gaping maws of the monsters. There were no more of the insect-devouring shaggy masses, nor even insects themselves nor any other forms of life. The plain was like a vast level of dried primordial ooze, or the bed of some vanished ocean.

Hunger and weariness assailed the men. They were driven ever onward at a merciless, unrelenting pace, till they panted for breath and their muscles grew leaden with fatigue. Hours seemed to pass; but the dim sun rose no higher above the horizon. It swung in a low arc, like the sun of sub-polar lands. The mountains drew no nearer, but receded on the vast vague skies.

The plain began to reveal details hitherto unnoticed. Low hills sprang up, the undulations deepened. Bare ravines of dark, sullen, semi-basaltic stone intersected it at intervals. Still there were no signs of life, no plants, no trees, no habitations. The mutineers wondered wearily where they were being taken, and when they would reach the destination sought by their captors. They could not imagine what it would be like.

Now they were driven along a ravine in which ran a rapid stream. The ravine grew deeper; and sheer cliffs, increasing in height to a hundred feet or more, hemmed it in on each side. Rounding a sharp turn, the men saw before them a broad space of level shore, and above the shore a cliff that was lined with several rows of cavern-mouths and little steps cut in the stone. Dozens of pygmies, of the same type as their captors, were gathered

before the entrances of the lower caves. An animated chattering arose among them at sight of the cavalcade and its prisoners.

“Troglodytes,” exclaimed Roverton, feeling in spite of his fatigue the keen interest of a man of science. He and his companions were immediately surrounded by the pygmies, some of whom, on closer inspection, appeared to be of a different sex from the ones they had first encountered. There were also a few infants, the smallest of which were little larger than guinea-pigs.

The members of the cavalcade dismounted and proceeded to unload the panniers with the assistance of the others. The slabs of fleshy white substance were piled on the ground beside several large flat mortars of stone. When the unloading was completed, the pygmies laid some of the slabs in these mortars and began pounding them with heavy pestles. They made signs to the men, enjoining them to do likewise.

“I suppose the stuff is used for food,” surmised Adams. “Maybe it’s the staff of life among these creatures.” He and the others selected pestles and started to pound one of the slabs. The material was easily reduced to a fine, creamy paste. It gave off a pungent odor that was far from unpleasant; and in spite of certain highly repulsive memories the three men became conscious that they were extremely hungry.

When all the mortars were full of paste, the pygmies began to devour it without any further formality, using not only their webbed hands but their prehensile trunks to convey the stuff to their double mouths. They motioned to the men that they also should eat.

The paste had a saline flavor and vaguely resembled a mixture of sea-fish with some nutritious root-vegetable. It was quite palatable on the whole; and it served to allay the pangs of hunger in a fairly satisfactory manner. At the end of the meal a sort of fermented beverage, yellow-green in color, was brought out in shallow vessels of earthen-ware. The taste was

disagreeable and very acrid; but all fatigue disappeared after a few sips; and the mutineers were able to survey their situation with new hopefulness and courage.

Several hours were now spent in pounding up the remainder of the slabs. The paste was stored in broad-mouthed urns and these urns were carried into the lower caves. Roverton and his comrades were signed to assist in this work. The caves were too low to permit their standing upright and were very dark and shadowy, with many ramifications of irregular size. The furnishings were quite primitive, as was to be expected; though there was a welcome degree of cleanliness. They were full of a smoke-like smell, and in one of them a little fire was burning. The fuel resembled some sort of peat. There were tiny couches covered with furless skins, probably those of creatures similar to the lizard-things.

The low sun had gone down behind the cliffs when the last urn was carried into the caverns. A cold green twilight gathered along the streams, thickened by the rising wispy vapors. The lizard-monsters were led away to a cave larger than the rest, lying at some distance apart. Obviously it served as a stable. Then the pygmies retired by twos and threes to their caverns, after indicating a grotto which the men were to occupy. Four pygmies, armed with their queer halberds and heavily weighted knives, remained on guard in front of the entrance.

Darkness flowed into the grotto like a rising sea of stealthy silent ripples. With its coming, an odd lethargy overpowered the men — a reaction from all the stress and strain and hardship they had endured, from the tax of all the new, unearthly impressions their nerves had sustained. They stretched out on the stone floor, using the little couches along the wall for pillows. In a few minutes they were asleep.

They awoke with the sound of myriad cheepings and chatterings outside their cavern in the pale mistiness of dawn.

“Sounds like a caucus,” surmised Roverton as he crawled toward the entrance. Peering out, he saw that more than a hundred pygmies, half of whom must have come from some other community, were collected on the stream-bank and were seemingly engaged in an earnest debate. All of them kept looking with their round orbs toward the cave occupied by the mutineers. Their words, expressions, gestures, were so remote from anything familiar to humanity, that it was impossible to guess the trend or import of their debate, or to know whether the decision at which they were arriving was friendly or inimical.

“They give me the creeps,” said Deming. “We don’t know whether they’re going to eat us or elect us for their tribal deities.”

Apparently at a word of command, the guards approached the cavern-mouth and motioned the men to come forth. They obeyed. Platters full of the white paste and cups of a sweetish ebon-black beverage were set before them; and while they ate and drank, the whole assemblage looked on in silence. Somehow, there seemed to be a change in the attitude of the pygmies; but the nature of the change, or what it might portend, was beyond surmise. The whole proceeding was extremely mysterious and had almost the air of some sinister sacrament. The black beverage must have been mildly narcotic, for the men began to feel as if they were drugged. There was a slight deadening of all their senses, though their brain-centers remained alert.

“I don’t like this,” murmured Roverton. He and the others felt a growing disquietude, for which they could assign no determinate reason. They were not re-assured when the three lizard-monsters, followed by two more of a similar type, re-appeared along the stream-bank. All were mounted by

armed pygmies who, when they approached, made signs that the men should precede them along their line of march. The mutineers started downstream, with the mounted guards and the whole assemblage following them.

Soon the bank grew narrower and the walls above more precipitous. The foothold narrowed to a yard-wide path, beside which the waters rushed with sullen vehemence in a series of torrential rapids teathed with yellow foam. Passing a turn in the wall, the men saw that the bank ended in a large cavern-mouth. Beyond, the cliffs rose perpendicularly from the torrent.

The three hesitated as they neared the cavern. What fate was before them they could not conjecture; but their sense of alarm and disquietude increased. They looked back and saw that the foremost lizard-thing was close upon them, yawning more horribly than the black cave in front. They thought of leaping into the stream; but the headlong torrent was full of sharp rocks; and a roaring from beyond the cliff betokened the nearness of a waterfall. The walls above the path were impossible to climb; so they entered the cavern.

The place was quite roomy in distinction to the caves inhabited by the pygmies, and the men were not forced to stoop at any time. But, blinded with the daylight they had left, they stumbled over stones and against the winding walls as they groped in utter darkness. A gust of chill and noisome air came forth like a subterranean wind from the heart of the cavern; and one of the monsters was breathing at their heels. They could see nothing, could be sure of nothing; but perforce they must go on, not knowing if the next step would plunge them into some terrific pit or bottomless gulf. A sense of uncanny menace, of weird unhuman horror, increased upon them momentarily.

“This place is dark as the coal-cellars of Hades,” jested Roverton. The others laughed bravely, though their nerves were on edge with sinister

expectation and uncertainty.

The draft of dank, mephitic air grew stronger. The smell of stagnant, sunless waters, lying at some unfathomable depth, mingled in the men's nostrils with a nauseating reek as of bat-haunted catacombs or foul animal-dens.

"Phooey !" grumbled Deming. "This is worse than Gorgonzola and fox-guts all in one."

The floor of the cavern began to slope downward. Step by step the descent steepened like some infernal chute, till the mutineers could hardly keep their footing in the dark.

Remote and faint, like a little patch of phosphorescence, a light dawned in the depths below. The walls of the cavern, dolorously ribbed and arched, were now distinguishable. The light strengthened as the men went on; and soon it was all about them, pouring in pale-blue rays from an undiscerned subterranean source.

The incline ended abruptly, and they came out in a vast chamber full of the queer radiance, which appeared to emanate from roof and walls like some kind of radioactivity. They were on a broad semi-circular shelf; and, crossing the shelf, they found that it terminated sharply and fell sheer down for perhaps fifty feet to a great pool in the center of the chamber. There were ledges on the opposite side of the cavern at the same level as the one on which they stood; and there were smaller caves that ramified from these ledges. But apparently none of the caves was attainable from the ledge where the incline had ended. Between, were perpendicular walls that could afford no moment's foothold anywhere.

The three men stood on the brink above the pool and looked about hem. They could hear the shuffling of the first lizard-monster on the incline and could see the baleful glaring of its single eye as it came forward.

“This looks like the last page of the last chapter.” Roverton was now leering down at the pool. The others followed his gaze. The waters were dusky, stirless, dull, ungleaming, beneath the bluish glow from the cavern-sides. They were like something that had been asleep or dead for thousands of years; and the stench that arose from them suggested ages of slow putrefaction.

“Good Lord ! What is that ?” Roverton had noticed a change in the waters, an odd glimmer that came from beneath their surface as if a drowned moon were rising within them. Then the dead calm of the pool was broken with a million spreading ripples, and a vast head, dripping with loathsome luminescence, upreared from the waters. The thing was seven or eight feet wide, it was hideously round and formless and seemed to consist mainly of gaping mouths and glaring eyes all strewn together in a mad chaos of malignity and horror. There were at least five mouths, each of them large enough to devour a man at one swallow. They were fangless, and elastically distensible. Scattered among them, the eyes burned like satanic embers.

One of the lizard-monsters had crawled forth on the shelf. Scores of the pygmies were crowding beside and behind it, and some of them now advanced till they were abreast of the men. They stared down at the fearsome thing in the pool and made uncouth gestures and genuflections with heads, hands and long prehensile trunks, as if they were invoking or worshiping it. Their shrill voices rose in a rhythmically wavering chant.

The men were almost stupefied with horror. The creature in the gulf was beyond anything in earthly legend or nightmare. And the rites of the obeisance offered by the pygmies was unbelievably revolting.

“The thing is their god,” Roverton cried. “Probably they are going to sacrifice us to it.”

The ledge was not thronged with pygmies; and the lizard-monster had pushed forward till the three men had no more than standing room on the brink of the gulf, in a crescent-like arc formed by its body.

The ceremony performed by the pygmies came to an end, their genuflections and chantings ceased, and all turned their eyes in a simultaneous unwinking stare on the mutineers. The four who were mounted upon the lizard-creature gave vent in unison to a single word of command.

“Ptrahsai!” The monster opened its maw and pushed forward with its squat jowl. Its horrible teeth were like a moving portcullis. Its breath was like a fetid wind. There was no time for terror, and no chance to resist: the men tottered and slipped on the narrowing verge, and toppled simultaneously into space. In his fall Roverton clutched automatically at the nearest of the pygmies, caught the creature by its trunk, and bore it along as he hurtled through the air. He and his companions plunged with a huge splash into the pool and sank far below the surface. With a concerted presence of mind they all came up as close to the cavern-wall as they could and began to look for possible foot-holds. Roverton had not lost his grip on the pygmy. The creature howled ferociously when its head came above the water, and tried to claw him with its long toenails.

The precipice was bare and sheer from the water's edge, with no visible break anywhere. The men swam desperately along it, searching for an aperture or a ledge. The thing of mouths and eyes had begun to move toward them, and they felt sick with terror and repulsion at the sight of its slow, phosphorescent gliding. There was a damnable deliberation, a dreadful leisureliness in its motion, as if it knew that there was no way in which its victims could evade the elastic yawning of those five abominable mouths. It approached, till the cavern-wall beside the swimmers grew

brighter with the foul effulgence of its looming head. They could see beneath and behind the head the distorting glowing of a long, formless body submerged in the black abysses of the pool.

Roverton was nearest to the monster when it came abreast. Its malignant bulging eyes were all bent upon him and its foremost mouth opened more widely and slavered with an execrable slime. Now it loomed athwart him, and he could feel the unutterable corruption of its breath. He was driven against the cavern-wall; and, managing to steady himself for a moment, he pushed the pygmy toward the approaching mouth. The pygmy yelled and struggled in a frenzy of fear till the awful slobbering lips had closed upon it. The monster paused as if its appetite and curiosity were appeased for the nonce; and the three men took advantage of this to continue their exploration of the wall.

Suddenly they perceived a low aperture in the smooth cliff, into which the waters flowed with a gentle rippling. The aperture was narrow and its roof was not more than a foot above the surface. It might or might not afford an escape from the pool; but no other possible exit could be detected. Without hesitation Adams swam into the opening and the others followed him.

The water was still deep beneath them and they did not touch bottom anywhere. The walls of the little cavern were luminous at first; but the luminosity soon ceased and left them in absolute darkness. As they swam onward, they could no longer judge the extent of the air-space above them. At no time, however, were they compelled to dive beneath the surface; and they soon found that the cave was now wide enough to permit their moving side by side. They perceived also that they were caught in the flow of an ever-strengthening current which carried them on with considerable velocity. Since there was no sign of pursuit from the monster in the pool,

the men began to feel a faint quickening of hope. Of course the stream might carry them to the very bowels of this terrific transstellar world, or might plunge at any moment into some dreadful gulf; or the roof might close in and crush them down beneath the noisome strangling waters. But at any rate they felt that there was a chance of ultimate emergence; and anything almost would be better than the proximity of the luminescent monster with mephitic breath and myriad eyes and mouths. Probably the cave in which they now swam was far too narrow to permit the entrance of its loathly bulk.

How long the three men floated in the swiftening current, it was impossible for them to know. As far as they could tell, there was no change in their situation; nor could they estimate how far they had gone in this underground world. The darkness weighed upon them, seemingly no less opaque and heavy than the water itself and the cavern-walls. They resigned themselves to the obscure progression of the stream, saving their strength as much as possible for any future emergency that might arise.

At length, when it seemed that they were irretrievably lost in the solid abysmal murk, when their eyes had forgotten the very memory of sight, the darkness before them was pierced by a pinpoint of light. The light increased by slow, uncertain degrees, but for awhile they were doubtful as to its nature, not knowing whether they were approaching another vault of phosphorescence, or the actual outer daylight. However, they were thankful for its dim glimmering. The stream had become still swifter and rougher, with boulder-cloven rapids in which their descent was impetuous and dangerous. More than once the men were almost thrown against the dark and jagged masses that towered about them.

All at once the current slackened and the seething rapids died in a broad pool above which the arching of the lofty cavern-dome was now

discernible. The light poured in a stream of pale radiance across this pool from what was evidently the cavern's mouth; and beyond the mouth a large sheet of sun-white water stretched away and was lost in the luminous distance.

All three men were suddenly conscious of a crushing, dragging fatigue — an overwhelming reaction from all the peril and hardship they had undergone. But the prospect of emergence from this underworld of mysterious horror prompted them to summon their remaining strength with sodden limbs, they swam toward the cavern-mouth and floated through its black arch into the silvery dazzle of a great lake. The lake was probably the same body of water they had seen from afar on the previous day. Its aspect was ineffably weird and desolate. High cliffs with many buttresses and chimneys overhung the cavern from which they had emerged, and ran away on either side in gradually descending lines till they ceased in long flats of ooze and sand. There was no trace of vegetation anywhere — nothing but the wart stone of the cliffs, and the gray mud of the marshes, and the wan, dead waters. And at first the men thought that there was no life of any kind. They swam along the cliff, looking for a place to land. The levels of ooze and sand were seemingly miles away; and their progress in the sluggish lake was excruciatingly slow and tedious. They felt as if the strange, lifeless waters had soaked them to the bone; and a deadly inertia dragged them down and drugged their very senses till everything became blurred in a monotone of faintness. They were all too exhausted to speak or even think. Dimly, despairingly, they plowed on toward the receding goal of the far-off shore. Somehow, they were aware that a shadow had fallen upon them, breaking the diffused glare of the foggy sun. They were too weary to look up, or even speculate as to the origin of the shadow. Then they heard a harsh, jarring cry and a beating as of stiff, enormous wings, and something

swooped down and hovered above them. Turning their heads in the water, the three men saw an incredible sight. The thing that shadowed them was a mammoth bird-like creature with ribbed and leathern wings that were at least fifty feet from tip to tip. It suggested that prehistoric flying monster, the pterodactyl; and also it suggested a pelican, for beneath its seven-foot beak there hung a prodigious pouch. Scarcely crediting their eyes, the swimmers stared at the hovering apparition. It glowered upon them with malevolent orbs of fire big as dinner-plates; and then, with horrible swiftness, it descended. Adams, who was nearest, felt the huge beak close upon him and lift him from the water; and before he could realize what was happening he found himself in the interior of the pouch. Deming was seized and deposited beside him a moment later; and Roverton, who had instinctively dived beneath the surface, was retrieved and drawn out by the questing beak as if he had been a flounder, and joined the other two.

Utterly stunned, they groped about in the noisome darkness of the pouch and were thrown prostrate in a heap as they felt the monster rise and soar heavenward. There were eel-like things that squirmed beneath them; and they breathed a medley of suffocating stench. They could see nothing; but the gloom in which they lay was not absolute blackness, for the walls of the pouch were sufficiently permeable by light to create a blood-like dusk. The men could hear the loud beating of the leathern wings, could feel the rhythmic throb of their vibration; and while they were trying to habituate themselves to the unique situation they had the sense of being borne onward in vertiginous flight at a great altitude. Roverton was the first to speak.

“Of all the ineffable predicaments! Even a fiction-writer wouldn’t dare to imagine this, I suppose the creature has a nest somewhere and it’s carrying us home to provide food for its young or its mate.”

“Or,” suggested Adams, “having caught a supply of live meat, it’s going off somewhere to secure its vitamins.”

A faint laughter greeted the jest.

“Well,” put in Deming, “we’re getting a free ride, anyhow — for once we’re not having to walk, run or swim.”

Time passed in a doubtful, confused way. The beating of the wings had died to a swish of rushing air as about the unflapping level of flight of some giant vulture or bird of prey. Still there was the sense of prodigious speed, of horizon on horizon left behind, of plains and waters and mountains slipping away beneath in a swift recession.

The men grew sick and dizzy with the noxious air of their prison; they fell into periods of semi-consciousness from which they revived with a start. In the novel horror of their position, they almost lost the feeling of identity. It was as if they were part of some monstrous dream or hallucination.

After an undetermined lapse of time, they felt a slackening of the headlong flight and then heard once more the thunderous flap of those huge wings as the bird sank groundward. It seemed to descend from an alpsurpassing height, with tremendous velocity.

Now the descent was arrested with abrupt ease, like the stopping of an elevator. A sudden glimmering of light in the interior of the pouch, and Roverton and his companions were aware that the creature had opened its bill as if to seize something. Then, with a raucous, deafening cry, it began to thresh about as in some stupendous convulsion, and the men were thrown violently from side to side in the tossing pouch. It was impossible to imagine what had happened — the whole occurrence was supremely mysterious and terrifying. Adams and Deming were knocked almost senseless by the shaking they received; and Roverton alone was able to

retain anything like full cognizance. He realized that the bird was engaged in some sort of struggle or combat. After a brief interval its heavings became less tumultuous and powerful; and at last, with one hoarse, diabolic shriek, it appeared to collapse and lay still except for an occasional shuddering that shook body and neck and was communicated to the pouch. These shudderings diminished in force and frequency. The bird was now lying on its side, and the light entered the pouch directly through its wide-open beak.

Making sure that his companions had recovered their senses, Roverton crawled toward the light. The others followed in turn. Wriggling out through the slimy mouth, from which a frothy blood-like fluid was dripping, Roverton stood up dizzily and looked around.

The scene upon which he had emerged was wilder and madder than the grotesqueries of fever-delirium. For an instant he thought that the things about him were products of hallucination, were born of his overwrought nerves and brain. The flying monster was stretched on the ground and was wrapped from head to tail in the coils of something which Roverton could only designate to himself as a vegetable anaconda. The coils were pale-green with irregular brown and purplish mottlings and were manifestly hundreds of feet in length. They terminated in three heads covered with mouths like the suckers of an octopus. The coils had encircled the bird many times, and were evidently possessed of enormous constrictive power, for they had tightened upon their prey so that the body bulged between them in loathsome knots and protuberances. They were visibly rooted in a black, viscid-looking soil, and were swollen at their base like the bole of some ancient tree. The three heads had applied themselves to the back of their prostrate victim and were obviously drawing sustenance from it with their myriad suckers.

All around, in the veering vapors that rose from the ground like steam, there loomed the tossing tops and writhing trunks, branches and feelers of a medley of half-ophidian or half-animal plant-forms. They varied in size from vines that were no larger than coral snakes, to amorphous bulks with a hundred squirming tentacles, huge as the kraken of mythology. They were no less diverse than the plant-forms of a terrestrial jungle, and all of them were hideously alive. Many were devoid of anything that suggested leaves; but others had fingerlike fronds or a sort of foliage that resembled a network of hairy ropes, and which undoubtedly served the same purpose as a spider web, for in some of these nets queer, uncouth insects and birds had been caught. Others of the trees bore tumescent oval or globular fruits, and fleshy-looking flowers that could close like mouths upon their prey. Overhead, through the steaming vapors, a hot, swollen sun flamed down from an almost vertical altitude. Roverton realized that the bird-monster, flying at many hundreds of miles an hour, must have carried himself and his companions to a sub-tropic zone of the world in which they were marooned.

Adams and Deming had now crawled out and were standing beside Roverton. For once none of the three could utter a word, in the profound stupefaction with which they surveyed their surroundings. Instinctively they all looked for an avenue of escape in the rows of vegetable monstrosities that hemmed them in on all sides. But there was no break anywhere — only a writhing infinity of things that were plainly poisonous, maleficent and inimical. And somehow they all felt that these plant-entities were conscious of their presence, were observing them closely, and, in some manner not cognizable by human senses, were even discussing or debating them.

Adams ventured to take a step forward. Instantly a long tentacle shot out from the nearest of the kraken-like forms and encircled him. Struggling and screaming, he was drawn toward the great dark lumpish mass from which

the tentacles emanated. There was an open cuplike mouth of vermilion, fully a yard wide, in the center of this mass; and before his companions could even move, Adams was thrust into the mouth which forthwith closed upon him like the mouth of a tightened sack, Roverton and Deming were petrified with horror. Before they could even think of stirring from where they stood, two more of the tentacles shot out and gripped each of them about the waist. The grip was firm as an iron rope; and both were conscious of a sort of electric shock at the contact — a shock which served to stun them still further. Almost fainting, they were held erect by the horrible coils.

Nothing more happened for a brief interval. The incomprehensible strangeness of their position, the manifold fatigues and ordeals of the day, together with the shock of those coils, had dazed the two men so that they could hardly grasp the fate of their companion and their own imminent doom.

Everything became unreal, misty, dream-like. Then, through the vagueness that enveloped their senses, they saw that the dark mass at the core of the tentacles was beginning to move and heave. Soon the heavings turned to convulsions that became more and more violent. Roverton and Deming fell to the ground as the coils loosened their hold, and saw the lashing of a score of tentacles in the air above, tossing from side to side about the agitated central mass. Then, from this mass, the body of Adams was ejected, to fall beside Roverton and Deming. Obviously human flesh had not agreed with the digestion of the Andromedan plant-monster. The mass continued to heave and palpitate, and its myriad arms waved through the air as if in agony.

The two men dared not look at the body of their erstwhile comrade. Sick, and utterly spent with weariness and horror, they lay prostrate on the ground. After awhile they felt the tentacles encircle them once more; but

they were not drawn toward the central mouth but were lifted and dragged away toward the tangle of unearthly forms behind the vegetable kraken. Here they were caught by the supple serpentine limbs of other living plants and were drawn onward through the jungle.

They were dimly aware of multiform mouths that gaped or puckered in the air beside them, they felt the antennae-like tendrils that swayed and groped, they saw the poisoning branches armed with dart-like thorns, they saw the crimson ell-wide blossoms with cloven tongues from which a venomous honey dripped. And all around they heard the moan or shriek or hiss of animals snared by the demoniacal growths, and saw the yawning mouths that devoured their victims bodily, or the suckers that fastened upon them like the lips of vampires. But among these terrors and horrors of a transstellar flora the two men passed unharmed, untouched, and were drawn from coil to lethal coil, from net to fatal net, through the unimaginable woods. It was as if all these carnivorous and deadly things had been warned of their inedible nature, and were thrusting them away.

At length the light grew stronger and the men perceived that they were approaching the jungle's edge. The last of the plant-krakens gave them a vehement fling with its great arms, and the steaming soil of a flat, treeless plain hovered and reeled before them as they fell unconscious in the open sunlight.

Roverton was the first to recover his senses. Feeling very weak and dizzy, with blurred thoughts and vision, he tried to sit up, and fell back helplessly. Then as his eyes and brain began to clear, a little strength returned to him, and a second effort was more successful. His first thought was of his comrade, for whom he now looked. Deming still lay where he had fallen, in a prone and sprawling posture.

Several hours must have elapsed, for the sun was now hanging above the edge of the plain, and the tall, columnar vapors were tinted as with the flames of an aurora. The very soil itself, wet and glistening, had taken on a reflection of prismatic hues. Turning, Roverton saw behind him at a little distance the fearsome jungle from which he and Deming had been so summarily ejected by the sarcophagus trees and plants. The jungle was comparatively quiescent now; but its branches and boles were still swaying slightly; and a low, sibilant sound arose from among them like the hissing of an army of serpents.

Roverton managed to stand up. He tottered like a fever-patient, and could scarcely keep from falling. His mouth was parched and fiery with an all-consuming thirst; and his head throbbed like a beaten drum. Seeing a pool of water not far away, he started toward it, but was forced to finish his journey on hands and knees. He drank, and felt amazingly refreshed by the dark, bitterish fluid. Filling his cap (which he had somehow managed to retain through all the vicissitudes of the past two days) with the water, he went back to his companion, walking erect this time, and sprinkled some of the fluid on Deming's face. Deming stirred, and opened his eyes. In a brief while he was able to drink the remainder of the contents of the cap, and then succeeded in standing up and taking a few steps.

"Well, what's the next number on the program?" he queried. His voice was cracked and feeble, but indomitably gallant.

"Damned if I know," shrugged Roverton. "But I move that we get as far as possible from that beastly jungle." Neither he nor Deming could bear to think of Adams' fate or the abominable things they had seen and heard and felt. The whole experience was unendurable to human nerves, and revulsion sickened the two men as the memory of it arose on the threshold of their brains. Resolutely they turned their backs to the carnivorous forest, and

staggered away toward the dim and fuming horizon with its banners of rainbow splendor.

The landscape through which they now wandered was like the bottom of a newly dried ocean. It was one vast level of reeking clay, of a peculiar consistency, which yielded a little like rubber or some resilient fabric beneath their feet, without breaking through. The sensation afforded by treading upon it was uncanny and disconcerting. At every step they fully expected to sink down in some bog or quicksand. They realized why they had not suffered any contusions or broken bones when the living trees had hurled them forth with such irresistible violence.

There were many pools of water in the plain; and once the men were compelled to deviate from their course by a narrow, winding lake. The aspect of the resilient ooze was indelectably monotonous and was unrelieved by any vegetable growth or outcropping of mineral. But somehow it was not dead, but conveyed a sense of somnolent vitality, as if it possessed a dark, secret life of its own.

The vapors parted in the oblique rays of the sun. Not far ahead, Roverton and Deming now perceived a low table-like elevation. Even at first sight, it suggested an island; and as the men neared it the characteristics it revealed were indicative that it really had been such, and that the plain around it had been the bed of a shallow sea at no very ancient date. There were wave-marks in the soil about the base; and, in contradistinction to the utter barrenness of the plain, there were boulders and tree-forms on its long undulating sides; and several ruinous walls and monoliths of an unearthly architecture were visible on the broad, flat summit.

“Now for some Andromedan archaeology,” Roverton commented, pointing to the ruins.

“Not to mention some more botany,” added Deming.

Both of them peered with considerable caution and trepidation at the foremost trees and plants. These were similar in type to the monstrosities of the jungle; but they were more sparse and scattered; and somehow there was a difference. When Deming and Roverton approached them the nature of the difference became manifest. The ophidian branches dropped and trailed on the ground, and were strangely still and unmoving. Seen closer at hand, they were withered and mummified. It was evident to these scientists that the trees had long been dead.

Not without repulsion, Roverton broke off the end of one of the hanging tentacles. It snapped easily; and he found that he could crumble it into fine powder between his fingers. Realizing that there was nothing to be feared, he and Deming began to climb the slope toward the fantastic ruins.

The soil of the hill, a sort of grey and purple marl, was firm beneath their feet. They reached the summit as the sinking sun began to disappear behind a far-off line of cliffs that rose like the core of a continent from the plain.

Circled about with rows of the dead plant-monsters, there stood in the center of the summit the strange ruins that Roverton and Deming had descried from below. They gleamed in the light with a dull luster, and appeared to be made of some foreign stone that was heavily impregnated with metal. They were apparently the remnants of several immense buildings, and bore the marks of some awful cataclysm that had carried away their super-structures and even much of the floor-work and foundations. One of the walls retained a doorway that was oddly high and narrow and was wider at top than at bottom. Also, there were some queer windows close to the ground. The men wondered at the physical characteristics of the race that had reared such edifices. From a human standpoint everything about the ruins was architecturally abnormal.

Roverton approached one of the monoliths. It was square in shape, was forty feet high by seven in diameter, and had manifestly been taller at one time, for the top was riven and jagged where it had been broken off abruptly. It was wrought of the same material as the walls. A series of bas-reliefs, intermingled with columns of hieroglyphic letter-forms, had been carved about the base. The bas-reliefs depicted beings of a curious type, with long thin trunks terminating at each end in a multitude of many-jointed limbs. The heads of these creatures, or what appeared to be such, were at the nether extremity of the trunks, and had two mouths that were set above a double row of eyes. Ear-like appendages drooped from the chins. The lower limbs ended in bird-like claws and the upper in broad, umbrella-shaped webs whose use was beyond conjecture. Roverton exclaimed with amazement as he called Deming's attention to these figures. Whether such beings represented an extinct race, or whether their prototypes were still to be found in this outré world, was of course an irresolvable problem. But the men felt that this mystery too would soon be solved. It would be solved whether they liked it or not.

The men were too worn out with their herculean ordeals to devote much time and energy to speculation of this order. They found a sheltered place in the angle of one of the walls, and sat down. Perforce they had eaten nothing since the food provided by the pygmies at early dawn; and seemingly there was no immediate prospect of finding any. They were desperate and there seemed no hope to lighten the depression that closed in about these doomed men.

The sun had gone down, leaving an erubescant twilight that stained the soil, the ruins and the dead trees as with a deepening tide of blood. A preternatural silence prevailed — a silence fraught with the sense of foreign

mystery, the burden of ultramundane antiquity that clung to those strange ruins. The men lay down and began to doze.

They awoke simultaneously, without knowing for a brief moment what it was that had aroused them. The twilight had turned to a rich violet, though the walls and trees were still clearly distinguishable. Somewhere in this twilight, there was a shrill, strident humming that grew louder momentarily.

All at once the humming was near at hand, in midair. It soared to a deafening clamor. Roverton and Deming saw that a swarm of giant insects with curving five-inch bills were hovering about them as if uncertain whether or not to attack. There seemed to be hundreds of these formidable-looking creatures. One of them, bolder than the others darted forward and stung Deming on the back of his left hand till its beak almost protruded from his palm. He cried out with the pain, and truck the insect with his other fist. It squashed beneath the blow and fell to the ground, emitting a nauseous stench.

Roverton sprang to his feet and broke off a bough from one of the trees. This he waved at the swarm, which retreated a little but did not disperse. An idea came to him, and he thrust the bough into Deming's hand, saying:

“If you can keep them off, I'll try to build a fire”

While Deming waved his ineffectual weapon at the hesitating army Roverton broke off more of the dead, tentacle-like boughs, piled them, and crushed others into a heap of fine dust with his heel. Then, in the twilight, he found two small fragments of the metallic stone from which the buildings had been wrought; and striking the fragments together, he obtained a spark which fell into the dust-pile and ignited it. The stuff was highly combustible, for in less than a minute the heap of boughs was burning brightly. Terrified by the blaze, the insects fell back; and their stridulation soon diminished and sank away in the distance.

Deming's hand was now painfully swollen and throbbing from the sting he had received.

"Those brutes would have finished us if they had been nervy enough to attack in force," he observed.

Roverton piled more fuel on the fire, in case the swarm should return.

"What a world !" he ejaculated. "I wish Volmar were here, confound him!"

As he spoke, there was a far-off droning in the crepuscular sky. For a moment, the men thought that the insect swarm was coming back to assail them again. Then the droning deepened to a great roar. The roar was somehow familiar, though neither could determine at first the memory which it tended to evoke. Then, where stars were beginning to pierce the vague heavens, they saw the indistinct bulk that descended toward them.

"My God! Is that the space-flier?" cried Deming.

With a final roaring and screeching of its propellers, the bulk came to rest within fifty feet of the fire. The light flickered on its metal sides and revealed the well-known ladder down which the three mutineers had climbed in an alien darkness.

A figure descended the ladder and came toward the fire, it was Captain Volmar. His face was drawn and livid in the firelight, and looked older than the two men remembered it. He greeted them stiffly, with an odd trace of embarrassment in his manner.

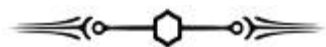
"I'm certainly glad to have located you," he announced, without waiting for Roverton or Deming to return too his salutation. "I've been flying around this damn planet all day, hoping there was one chance in a trillion of finding you again. I didn't take any bearings when I put you off in the night, so of course I had no idea where to look. I was about to give it up, when I saw the fire and decided to investigate."

“If you’ll come back with me,” he continued, “we’ll let bygones be bygones. I’m short-handed now, and am going to give up the trip and start back for the solar system. We began to develop engine-trouble not long after we put you off; and two of the men were electrocuted by a short-circuit before the trouble was remedied. Their bodies are floating somewhere in mid-ether now — I gave them a space-burial. Then Jasper fell ill, and I’ve been running the flier single-handed for the past twenty-four hours. I’m sorry I was so hasty with you — I certainly put you off on an impossible sort of world. I’ve been all over it today, and there’s nothing anywhere but seas, deserts, marshes, mud-flats, jungles of crazy-looking vegetation, a lot of equally desolate ruins, and no life except overgrown insects, reptiles, and a few cliff-dwelling pygmies in the sub-polar regions. It’s a wonder that even two of you have managed to survive. Come on — you can tell me your story when we’re aboard the flier.”

Roverton and Deming followed him as he turned and re-ascended the ladder. The manhole closed behind them with a clang that was more grateful to their ears than music. A minute more, and the flier was climbing the heavens along the crepuscular curve of the planet, till it soared into the daylight of Delta Andromedae. Then it rushed on through the sidereal gulfs, till the great sun became a star and began to resume its wonted place in an ever-receding constellation.

The Amazing Planet

OR



A Captivity in Serpens

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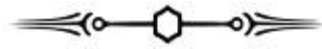
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CHAPTER I



“THIS WORLD,” SAID Volmar, “plainly belongs to the Mercurian type. One side is always presented to the sun; the other confronts eternal night; though it may be that there is a very slow and incomplete diurnal rotation. One hemisphere, as we have seen, is a blazing desert, and the other is sheeted with ice and frozen snow, except for the twilight zone in which we have landed.”

After eight unbroken months of ether-voyaging, in their attempted circuit of the universe, Captain Volmar and his men had felt the need of stretching their legs again on some sort of Terra Firma. The cramped quarters of the ether-ship *Alcyone*, the monotony of a never-ceasing flight through spatial emptiness and darkness, with only far-strewn suns and systems and nebulae for mile-posts, had palled on everyone, even the ascetically ardent Volmar. A brief respite on some planetary body was deemed advisable. They had made a number of such pauses during their half-decade of journeying.

They were nearing a lesser, unnamed sun in Serpens when this decision was made. Of course, the sun might not possess a planetary system. However, as they drew closer, the *Alcyone*'s telescopic reflectors revealed four planets that were circling it in wide-flung orbits. In the position which it then occupied, the innermost world was nearer to the space-ship than the others; and it soon attracted the curiosity of the voyagers by its odd markings.

Between the deserts of the sunlit hemisphere and the ice-fields and mountains that glimmered palely on the nightward side beneath two diminutive moons, a dark, narrow zone suggesting vegetation was visible

— a zone that encircled the planet from pole to pole. Clouds and vapors above this penumbral belt had proved the presence of an atmosphere. A landing had been made; and Captain Volmar, Jasper the mate, Roverton, and the other members of the crew, had emerged cautiously from the flier's man-hole after determining the temperature and chemical constituents of the outside air.

The temperature was moderate — about 60°. But the existence of one or two unknown, uncertain gases in the air had denoted the advisability of wearing masks and carrying oxygen-tanks. Equipped with these, and armed with automatics, the party sallied forth into a strange landscape.

The *Alcyone* had descended on a low, level, open hill-top. The ground resembled a coarse turf, and was pale-blue in color. When the men trod upon it for the first time, they found that it was not covered with anything in the least related to grass, but with a peculiar growth, two or three inches high, like a thin, branching fungus. It was not rooted in the soil; and it fell over or crumbled readily beneath the footsteps of the explorers.

They could see plainly enough in the weird twilight, strengthened as it was by the glimmering of the two moons, one of which was crescent and the other gibbous. Far-off, a row of mound-like hills, interspersed with sharp dolomites, was outlined on an afterglow of torrid saffron that soared in deepening rays to assail the green heavens. A few stars, and the other planets of the system, were visible.

Volmar and his men approached the edge of the hill-top. Below them, a long, undulant slope descended to a plain covered with the dark vegetation which they had descried from afar in space.

It was a mass of purples and blues and mauves, ranging from the palest to the darkest tints, and it seemed to vary in height from shrub-like growths to things that presented the size, if not the natural aspect, of full-grown

forest trees. Some of the smaller forms, like an advance guard, had climbed mid-way on the acclivity. They were very heavy at the base, with dwindling boles like inverted carrots and many nodular outbranchings of an irregularity more grotesque than that of any terrene cacti. The lower branches appeared to touch the ground, with the ungainly sprawl of crab or tarantula legs.

“I’d like to have a look at those things,” said Volmar. “Do you want to come with me, Roverton? The rest of you fellows had best remain within sight of the flier. We haven’t seen any sort of animate life yet; but there’s no telling what might be lurking in the neighborhood.”

He and Roverton went down the slope, with the fungoid turf crunching beneath their feet. They neared the foremost plant-forms rather cautiously, remembering their unpleasant experiences with flesh-eating trees and vegetables in other worlds. These forms, however, though they were extremely uncouth and even ugly, displayed none of the usual characteristics of carnivorous plants.

“What are they?” Volmar was frankly puzzled. “Cacti? Fungi? Aerophytes? I don’t believe they have any root-systems at all — they look as if one could knock them over very easily.”

He approached one of the short, heavy boles, and pushed it with his foot. It fell to the ground and lay sprawling with its thick, ungainly limbs in the air. Unlike the tiny growths underfoot, it was very tough and rubbery, and none of its branches were broken or in any wise injured by the fall. On the contrary, they had bent with elastic ease where they were caught underneath the bole.

“The thing must be an air-plant,” said Volmar. “I don’t see any sign of root-attachments.”

He was turning away, when Roverton touched his arm.

“What do you think of that, Captain?”

The overthrown plant was moving, albeit with great slowness and sluggishness, in a manifest effort to right itself. The top heaved, the branches that were doubled beneath it seemed to straighten and lengthen, while those beneath the base contracted. The thing was plainly trying to secure a sort of leverage. At last, after several vain attempts, it resumed an upright position, on the very same spot from which Volmar had displaced it.

“That’s interesting,” Volmar commented. “These things have the power of mobility when such is needed. I wouldn’t be surprised if all this vegetation were migratory. Doubtless it has developed the ability to move from place to place on account of the severely changing climatic conditions. In all likelihood the habitable twilight zone shifts more or less during the planet’s annual rotation, and these plants follow it, to avoid the extreme heat of full daylight or the utter cold of darkness. If there is any animal life, it is probably nomadic also.”

“Shall we go on?” asked Roverton. “That forest at the bottom of the hill should be worthy of study.”

“Alright,” assented Volmar. “But we mustn’t wander too far from the others. There’s no use taking chances in an unexplored world — we’ve done that before and have gotten into some tight places.”

A hundred yards, and they were among the outposts of the strange forest. Many of the growths resembled the first shrubs in type, though they were heavier and taller. Others grew in recumbent positions, like vast vegetable centipedes or many-legged monsters. Some retracted their outer limbs in a sluggish caution before the approach of the men; but most of them did not appear to move at all. There seemed to be nothing to fear from these plants; so Volmar and Roverton went on among the irregularly scattered groups,

examining them with much curiosity. So far, they had seen no evidence whatever of animal or insect life.

In their scientific absorption, the explorers did not realize how far they had wandered, till they saw that the plants around them were becoming higher and thicker. Many of them were twenty or thirty feet tall; and they stood so close that further progress among them was difficult.

“I guess we’d better turn back,” said Volmar.

He and Roverton started to retrace their steps, which were plainly marked in the trodden fungi. To their surprise, when they had gone only a little distance, they found that the path was now blocked in many places by thickets of the strange trees, which must have closed in stealthily behind their passing, though no movement of this sort had been discernible at the time. Perhaps these plants had been impelled to follow them by some obscure instinct or stirring of curiosity. But evidently they were not aggressive or dangerous; and their motor activity was of the most torpid kind.

Because of this re-arrangement of the growths, however, the men were compelled to divagate from their direct route as they returned toward the *Alcyone*. But they did not anticipate any real difficulty, and were not likely to go astray, since the low hill from which they had descended was visible in many places above the tops of the vegetation.

Presently they came to some old footmarks, characterized by three toes of preternatural length and sharpness. The prints were very far apart, suggesting that their originator was possessed of phenomenally long legs.

Volmar and Roverton followed the tracks, insomuch as these appeared to be going in the general direction of the space-flier. But a little further on, in the lee of a dense clump of vegetation, the tracks entered a huge burrow, into which the men could almost have walked without stooping, on a gentle

incline. Both eyed it rather warily as they passed; but there was no visible sign of its occupant.

“I’m not sure that I’d care to meet that customer, whatever it is,” observed Roverton. “Probably it’s some loathsome overgrown insect.”

They had gone perhaps seventy feet beyond the burrow’s entrance, when the ground suddenly caved in beneath Volmar, who was in the lead, and he disappeared from Roverton’s sight. Hastening to the edge of the hole into which his companion had fallen, Roverton met a similar fate, for the ground crumbled beneath him and he was precipitated into a dark pit seven or eight feet deep, landing beside Volmar. Both were a little bruised by the fall but were otherwise unhurt. They had broken through into the burrow, whose entrance they could now see from where they were lying. The place was filled with a noisome, mephitic smell, and was damp with disagreeable ooziings. Picking themselves up, the men started toward the entrance at once, hoping that the burrow’s owner had not been aroused by their involuntary intrusion.

As they approached the mouth, they were startled by a medley of shrill, piping sounds which arose from without — the first sounds they had heard in this fantastic world. As they drew still nearer, they saw the silhouettes of two figures that were standing just outside the cave. The figures were bipedal, with thick legs of disproportionate shortness, and arms that reached almost to the ground. The heads could not be seen from within the tunnel. These extraordinary beings were stretching a narrow, heavy-stranded net, weighted at the ends with balls of metal or mineral, which they held between them across the entrance. They continued their piping noise; and their voices grew shriller still and took on an odd, cajoling note.

Volmar and Roverton had paused.

“Now what?” whispered Roverton.

“I think,” Volmar whispered in reply, “that those creatures, whoever or whatever they are, must be waiting for the owner of the burrow to come out. They have tracked it, or perhaps have even driven it here. Probably they’re planning to wind that net around its long legs when it emerges.”

“Or,” suggested Roverton, “maybe they saw us fall into the pit and are planning to take us captive.”

They returned cautiously toward the caved-in portion of the burrow, and stopped when they saw that several more of the weird hunters, some of them equipped with nets and others armed with trident-headed lances, were grouped around the opening above and were peering down. The heads of these beings were even more peculiar than their limbs, and were quite hideous from a human stand-point. They possessed three eyes, two of which were set obliquely in close juxtaposition to a slit-like mouth surrounded with waving or drooping tentacles, and the other near the top of a long, sloping brow that was lined with sparse bristles. There were rudimentary projections from each jowl, that might have been either ears or wattles; but nothing even remotely suggestive of nostrils was detectible. The whole expression was supremely wild and ferocious.

“Can’t say that I admire the looks of those customers,” murmured Roverton. “Plainly they’re a hunting-party; and we, or the occupant of this burrow — or both — have been marked out as their meat.”

The guards at the entrance had continued their piping song. Suddenly it seemed to find a far-off echo in the depths of the cavern. The sound approached and grew louder and shriller. Volmar and Roverton could see the gleaming of two greenish, phosphorescent eyes in the darkness beyond the circle of dim light that fell from the caved-in roof.

“The hunters are luring that beast,” said Volmar, “by imitating the voices of its own kind.”

He and Roverton, with their automatics ready, now retreated slowly toward the entrance, watching over their shoulders as they went to the phosphoric eyes that continued to advance from the gloom.

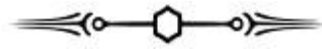
Now they could see two enormous, spraddling, many-jointed legs, and a squat, shaggy face and globe-like body; and then the two hind-legs, as the creature came into the light. Somehow, it was more like an insect than an animal — like some Gargantuan, over-nourished arachnid. As the monster passed beneath the opening, the two men saw the flash of a spear cast by one of the watchers above. It sank into the dark, hairy body, and the piping rose to a harsh scream, as the creature leapt forward upon Volmar and Roverton.

With their automatics flaming and crackling in the gloom, the men turned and ran toward the entrance. Their maddened pursuer, seemingly undeterred by the bullets, was close upon their heels.

The weighted net was still stretched across the burrow's mouth, and Volmar and Roverton now fired their last cartridges at the legs of the two beings who held it. Both of these creatures fell sprawling and dropped the net. The men burst forth into the light, only to find themselves confronted by a dozen similar beings, all armed with nets or spears. These bizarre hunters gave no evidence of fear or surprise at the appearance of the earthlings, but proceeded with calm, methodical swiftness to form in a ring. The men rushed upon them hoping to break through, but with ineluctable speed and deftness each was entangled in the heavy meshes cast about him, and went to the ground with pinioned arms and legs. Their automatics had fallen from their fingers and were beyond reach. Lying helpless, they saw the emerging of the monster that had driven them from the burrow. It was neatly trapped in its turn by the guards; and it lay palpitating on the ground,

bleeding a thick bluish fluid from the spear and bullet wounds it had received.

CHAPTER II



THE TWO MEN could scarcely move, so closely were the weighted meshes wound about them.

“This is a pretty tight situation,” remarked Roverton, whose wit was unquenchable by any hardship or danger, no matter how desperate.

“Yes, and it may be tighter before we are through,” added Volmar grimly, as he lay staring up into the strange faces of their captors, who had gathered in a circle about the earth-men and were surveying them with manifest curiosity. Seen close at hand, these beings were truly hideous and repulsive, though it was likely that they represented an evolutionary type similar in mental endowment to aboriginal man. They were of gigantic stature, averaging seven or eight feet. Their naked, dark-grey bodies were covered with a hairless skin marked off into rudimentary scales or plates, possibly denotive of some reptilian origin or affinity. Their three eyes, their sloping brows and tentacle-fringed mouths gave them an indescribably weird appearance. Their long arms were triple-jointed, in opposition to the squat, single-jointed legs, which ended in webbed feet. Their fingers were seemingly boneless, but extremely powerful and supple, and were wrapped like tentacles about the terrific trident spears which they carried. The heads and shafts of these weapons were both made of the same copper-colored metal.

The hunters began to gibber among themselves, in guttural growling voices that were evidently their natural tones, and were quite unlike the shrill pipings with which they had lured the monster from its burrow. Their

speech seemed to consist of monosyllabic sounds whose exact phonetic nature would have defied human imitation or classification.

After what was plainly a sort of debate two of them stepped forward and proceeded to unbind the legs of the earth-men, leaving their arms tied by the knotted nets, and prodded them roughly with spear-butts to make them stand up.

Volmar and Roverton scarcely needed this urging. They rose awkwardly and stiffly. Then, bearing them along in its midst, the whole party started off through the woods in an opposite direction from the hill on which the flier had landed. Some of the hunters had tied the trussed monster to a sort of light metal frame with handles and were carrying it among them. The two that had been wounded by the earth-men limped along in the rear. Short-legged as they were, these beings made rapid progress, and Volmar and Roverton were soon compelled to quicken their pace.

“Now whither?” asked Roverton. “I suppose you and I are going into the tribal pot along with that monster.”

Volmar did not answer. He was examining the net by which his arms were bound. It was made of a finely linked metal, like highly tempered copper, and was very strong. The workmanship was so delicate and regular as to arouse wonderment. Also, the spears carried by the giants were exquisitely wrought.

“I wonder,” soliloquized Volmar, “if these nets and weapons were made by their owners?”

“Probably,” said Roverton. “Of course, the work seems to betoken a considerable degree of manual skill and civilization; and these beings are a pretty low and bestial-looking lot from a human aesthetic viewpoint. But after all we can’t tell much about them from their appearance. All the

extraplanetary peoples we have met were more or less monstrous according to our standards.”

“That’s true,” assented Volmar slowly. “But somehow I have a hunch that our captors aren’t the only beings on this world.”

“Maybe; but I’m not very curious to know. I hope Jasper and the others will follow our trail — they must be worrying about us by now. A little rescue party would certainly be welcome.”

“We may have to rescue ourselves — it all depends on what we get into. Our captors are doubtless nomads who roam from place to place in the twilight zone, like the vegetation. There’s no telling what sort of abodes they have — if any. It is possible that they may dwell underground.”

“Christ! I’ve had enough burrows for one day,” ejaculated Roverton. “Also, I’m not likely to forget the experience that Deming, Adams and myself had with those troglodyte pygmies in Andromeda.”

Several miles were traversed by the party. The way led deviously over a flat plain, amid clumps of the rootless vegetation. The row of mound-like hills and sharp dolomites which the men had seen from the *Alcyone’s* landing-place was now very near. The trees became sparser, and ended on the verge of a shallow, rock-strewn valley where thin streams of water ran tortuously down to a long, winding lake. Crossing this valley, whose soil was covered by small fungi, and fording one of the streams, the party entered a deep gorge which wound slowly upward among the further hills. Here there were deep chasms, and crags of roughly splintered stone with outcroppings of unknown metal, and dark torrents that fumed with iridescent vapors. However, there was a well-marked path, and progress was not difficult.

Now the path began to slope downward. Soon the party emerged in an amphitheater surrounded by crags and pinnacles. Here an unexpected sight

awaited the earth-men. To one side, in the lee of a cliff, were a number of rude stone huts; and in the middle of the amphitheatre there reposed a huge, glittering object, perfectly oval in form, and plainly of an artificial nature.

“I’ll wager,” cried Roverton, “that that thing is some kind of air-vessel, or even space-craft.”

“I never bet,” rejoined Volmar. “But I shouldn’t be surprised if you were right.”

Many figures were moving about the oval object; and as the party drew nearer, it could be seen that they were not all of the same type or species. Many were like the hunters who had captured Volmar and Roverton; but others differed as widely from these as the hunters differed in their turn from the earth-men. They were about four feet tall, with spindling limbs and delicate bodies, pinched in the center like those of ants, and heads of such disproportionate size as to give at once the impression of artificial masks. These creatures were gorgeously colored, with all the hues of the harlequin opal, and contrasted extremely with the dark giants. Seen closer at hand, the oval object revealed a series of small ports filled with a vitreous, violet-hued material, and an open circular door in its side from which a stair-case of light aerial structure, doubtless collapsible, ran to the ground.

The two groups of unearthly beings were engaged in a lively conversation, and the gruff gutturals of the giants were surmounted by the sweet, piercing sibilants of the dwarfs. Several strange animals of varying size and monstrosity, bound with nets, were lying on the ground at one side, and some of the dwarfs were bringing copper-colored nets and spears and other weapons or implements of more doubtful use from the interior of the oval vessel. When some of these articles were handed over to the giants, the earth-men surmised that they were being bartered in exchange for the trussed animals.

“What did I tell you?” cried Volmar. “I knew that those nets and tridents weren’t made by our captors. And I doubt very much if the dwarfs are natives of this planet at all. I believe they have come from a neighboring world of this same solar system. Possibly they are zoologists, and are collecting specimens of the local fauna. I think those head-pieces of theirs are respirative masks — they don’t seem to fit with the rest of their anatomy. No doubt they are unable to breathe the atmosphere of this world, at least in its pure state; and it is probable that those masks include some sort of filtering apparatus. There is nothing to be discerned in the nature of air-tanks.”

Seeing the approach of the hunters with Volmar and Roverton in their midst, the two groups interrupted their bargaining and stared in silence at the new-comers. The heads, or masks, of the dwarfs were fitted with two pairs of green eyes, set vertically and far apart; and their gaze was uncannily intent and wholly unchanging. The eyes were divided into many facets, like those of an insect, and blazed with emerald light. Between and below the eyes there was a short, trumpet-like attachment, which doubtless served as a mouth-piece; and its hollow tube might well have contained the filtering apparatus surmised by Volmar. Two curving horns, perforated like flutes, arose from the sides of those curious heads, and suggested an auditory mechanism. The limbs and torsos of the dwarfs were seemingly nude, and glittered like the shards of bright-colored beetles, with nacreous lights that ran and melted into each other with every movement.

A brief interval of silence, as if all these beings were overcome with amazement at the appearance of Volmar and Roverton; and then the dwarfs began to talk and gesticulate excitedly among themselves, pointing at the earth-men with their thin, pipe-like arms, which ended in rather intricate-looking hands whose fingers were fine as antennae. Then they addressed the

giant hunters in tones of interrogation, and a long discussion followed. Some of the dwarfs approached Volmar and Roverton and examined their clothing, masks and oxygen-tanks with minute attention. The tanks, which were built into the suits of flexible vitriolene, were apparently a source of special interest. There was much argument among the dwarfs in their sweet, hissing voices; and it was plain that some were maintaining one theory and some another. Their whole air was one of great puzzlement and perplexity.

“I’ll bet,” said Roverton, “that they think we’re some new species of animal native to this world, and are trying to classify us.”

“They have the look of investigative scientists,” agreed Volmar. “And it must be giving them a lot of trouble to place us in their system of biology or zoology.”

Now the dwarfs addressed themselves again to the hunters. There was much voluble expostulation on both sides.

“Guess they’re trying to drive a bargain for us,” conjectured Roverton. “And the hunters want full value in trade before they part with such rare specimens.”

A little later, to confirm this surmise, the dwarfs brought out a pile of odd but exquisitely wrought implements, some of which were perhaps designed for culinary use, and several large bell-shaped receptacles of semi-vitreous earthen-ware filled with varicolored materials that resembled roughly-ground farinaceous food-stuffs. These were laid before the hunters, who continued to demur and chaffer; and then some huge, abdominous bottles, made of an unidentifiable substance that was neither glass nor metal nor porcelain, were brought forth and added to the pile. Their contents were past the conjecture of the earth-men, but obviously they were prized by the giants and were considered as clinching the bargain. The chaffering came to an end, and attention was now turned to the wounded monster which the

giants had captured with Volmar and Roverton. The dwarfs appeared to be rather dubious about purchasing this creature, and examined its wounds in a somewhat cursory manner. Their decision was plainly negative; for after a little while the captors of the earth-men, as well as the other group of giants, broke up and went away in the direction of the stone huts, bearing the various articles of barter and the dying animal as well as several other curious creatures which the dwarfs for one reason or another had declined to buy.

“Sold!” laughed Roverton, as he peered at the unique menagerie of which he and Volmar were seemingly a part. There were at least a dozen of these quaint monsters, who represented the fauna of the planet. Some were undreamable mixtures of serpentine, insect and mammalian forms, others were loathsome, enormous annalids, and others still were not alliable with any known genus or combination of genera. Many were plainly ferocious, and were still struggling convulsively against their bonds. Anyone who came within reach of their dart-like talons or saw-like teeth would have fared badly.

“I wonder how the dwarfs are going to handle them?” questioned Volmar, as he eyed the contrast between these monsters, many of which were quite huge and bulky, and the frail iridescent beings.

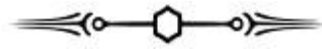
As if in answer to his query, a tackle of strong metallic-looking ropes was lowered from the door of the vessel. Then two dwarfs, armed with long rods of a dull bluish material terminating in circular disks covered with blunt prongs of some brighter substance, came forward from amid the group. Each applied the end of his rod to the spine of one of the struggling animals. Instantly, with a single shudder, the monsters lay still, as if dead. Manifestly some paralyzing force was emitted by the rods. The lowered ropes were then fastened about the inert monsters by other dwarfs, and they

were hauled up by a sort of mechanical windlass and disappeared within the oval vessel. Two more were treated in the same manner; and then the rod-bearers approached Volmar and Roverton.

“Hell! They’re going to lay us out too,” cried Roverton. He and Volmar looked about at the dwarfs, who surrounded them in a circle. Many of these frail beings were armed with the strange rods or with other instruments of dubious nature. But with their attenuated arms and pinched bodies they did not seem very formidable.

“Let’s make a break for it,” said Volmar. He and Roverton leapt back from the advancing rod-bearers, and hurled themselves at the circle. The dwarfs gave way, avoiding them with agility; and one of them reached out with his rod and touched Volmar on the chest while another caught Roverton in the abdomen. Neither was aware of any shock from the contact: the effect was more that of some narcotic or anaesthetic, pervading the entire body with instant numbness and insensibility. Darkness seemed to rush upon them from all sides, and both men became totally unconscious.

CHAPTER III



EMERGING FROM THE boundless midnight of oblivion, Roverton heard a deep thrumming sound which conveyed at once to his reviving brain the idea of some powerful mechanism. The sound was incessant and appeared to come from above. Roverton could feel its vibration in all the tissues of his body.

Opening his eyes, he received a series of visual impressions which for the moment were altogether confusing and were quite meaningless. There was a bright chaos of lights, of unearthly forms and angles, which baffled his brain. Then his eyes began to establish a sort of order, and he realized that he was lying on the floor of an unfamiliar structure, made of transparent panes in a frame-work of massive metal bars. The structure was perhaps seven feet in height by nine in diameter, and was shaped like a huge box or cage. Volmar, still unconscious, was lying beside him; and both Volmar and himself were no longer bound by the copperish nets. Between the bars he could see other structures of a similar type, in which the monsters trapped by the giant hunters and sold to the dwarfs were reposing. Some of these creatures were beginning to recover from their paralysis, while others were still insensible and immobile. The cages were in a long room with curving walls and a low, arched ceiling. There were numerous ports in the walls, which gave a rich purple light through their stained transparency.

Roverton was still bewildered as he studied these details. Then, as remembrance returned, he understood. He and Volmar were on board the oval vessel; and the deep thrumming sound was the noise of the engines. If,

as he had surmised, the vessel was an ether-ship, they were now in the midst of interplanetary space on their way to some unknown world!

Stunned and overwhelmed by the situation, he turned again to Volmar, and saw that the Captain was beginning to revive. His eyes opened, his fingers stirred; and then he lifted his right arm, rather feebly. A moment more, and he spoke.

“Where are we, Roverton?”

“I don’t know, exactly. But we’re all boxed up and ready for delivery to the zoo, wherever it is. And I think we are now in mid-space. In all likelihood the planet to which we are being taken is one that belongs to this same system. There are four worlds, as you will remember, and there’s no telling which one is our destination. Our chances of ever seeing the *Alcyone* again are none too gaudy under the circumstances. Hell, what a prospect!”

“The situation is rather dubious, to say the least,” assented Volmar. “Apart from our ignorance as to where we are being taken, and the practical impossibility of escape or rescue, we shall soon have the problems of air and food to cope with — problems for which there is no solution as far as I can see. “Our air-masks and tanks have not been tampered with; and we had a twelve-hours’ supply of compressed air when we left the *Alcyone*. But since we do not know how long we have been unconscious, we cannot compute how much of the supply still remains; and in any case asphyxiation is highly probable at no remote time.”

Roverton had been inspecting the cage with careful attention. He now noticed a curving metal tube which entered it through the floor at one end. Putting his hand over the mouth of the tube, he felt an air-current.

“I think,” he remarked, “that our cage, and doubtless the others, are being supplied with some sort of compressed air — probably the atmosphere of the Mercurian world on which we were captured. No doubt

the air in the room itself is that of the world to which the dwarfs are native, and is not respirable by these monsters.”

The room had been untenanted, save for the earth-men and their fellow-captives. Now Volmar and Roverton saw that five of the opalescent dwarfs had suddenly appeared, carrying receptacles of exotic forms, some of which were filled with liquids and others with objects resembling truffles and tubers. The dwarfs proceeded to open a panel worked by some hidden spring in the side of each cage and then introduced into each a vessel filled with fluid and one filled with the unknown foodstuffs. This was done very quickly and cautiously, and a mechanical arm-like apparatus was used in the actual transmission of the vessels. Afterwards the panels were closed immediately. When all the cages had been supplied in this manner, the dwarfs stood watching their occupants, who in most cases were greedily absorbing the food and water. The earth-men perceived that the dwarfs were now without their masks, revealing a physiognomy with elaborate eyes, proboscides and antennae, such as might well be looked for in connection with their delicate bodies.

When they noticed that Volmar and Roverton made no effort to touch the provender, the five dwarfs gathered about their cage, eyeing them curiously and carrying on an eager discussion or disputation.

“I’m hungry and thirsty enough,” confided Roverton to the Captain. “But how is one to eat and drink through a respirative mask — even granting that that stuff is fit for human consumption? However, I suppose the dwarfs think the masks are part of our anatomy, along with the suits and tanks. They must be pretty dumb not to realize that we are intelligent beings, who make use of artificial contrivances even as they themselves.”

“Literal-mindedness isn’t confined to human beings, I suspect,” said Volmar. “These fellows are evidently taking us at our face value. They

found us on the Mercurian world, along with the zoological specimens they were collecting; and doubtless it never occurred to them that we might have come there in a space-ship, like themselves. Anyway they are probably so conceited as to believe that their own world is the only one capable of producing highly evolved and intelligent life-forms. Such conceit, as you know, is not unusual. I remember, back in my boyhood, before space-travel became an actuality, how many of our own astronomers and other scientists argued that the earth was the only world in all the universe that was inhabitable by any kind of organic life.”

Presently the dwarfs departed; and time wore on. Overcome by their strange and perilous situation, the earth-men talked in a desultory manner, and lapsed into lengthening intervals of silence. They studied the interior of their prison, wondering if it would be possible to break out. The panes, whether of glass or some other transparent material, were enormously thick and were manifestly very strong; and anyway, escape would have been futile under the circumstances. Nevertheless, the idea appealed to them. Any sort of action, no matter how desperate or hopeless, seemed preferable to the monotony of supine waiting.

Roverton now inspected the vessel containing the tuber-like objects. It was made of earthen-ware and was quite heavy. Roverton emptied the contents on the floor, and then hurled the object with all his strength at one of the vitreous panes. There was a terrible crash; but to the amazement of himself and Volmar, neither the vessel nor the pane was broken or even splintered or cracked by the impact. Both the earthen-ware and the transparent material, it was obvious, were possessed of an iron toughness not characteristic of such substances in their mundane forms.

“Well, that’s that.” Roverton’s tone was rueful. “I guess we’re not going to bust out in a hurry.”

He and Volmar were consumed by growing thirst and hunger. They began to eye the water and food-stuffs avidly.

“What do you say we try it?” Roverton suggested.

“Go ahead. If you survive, I’ll experiment myself. But be careful.”

Roverton unfastened his helmet and removed it very cautiously. He took a deep breath. The air in the cage was heavy, with a queer smell that stung his nostrils and smarted in his lungs. It was breathable enough, as far as he could tell, though its cumulative effect on the human respiratory mechanism was an uncertain quantity.

He raised the deep vessel containing the water to his lips, and sipped it. The fluid was semi-opaque and flavorless. Then, gingerly, he picked up one of the tubers, which was about the size and shape of a large potato, and bit into it. The thing was tough-skinned, with a porous, fungoid-looking interior, and its taste was unpleasantly bitter. Roverton made a wry face, as he swallowed a scanty mouthful.

“Can’t say that I care for the grub.” He returned to the water and sipped a little more of it while Volmar proceeded to remove his own mask. Roverton then passed him the water and Volmar drank some of it cautiously and afterwards sampled one of the tubers but rejected it summarily without swallowing any of the unpalatable substance.

“I’m dubious of that stuff,” he observed. “As you know, lots of things which are perfectly good foods for ultra-terrestrial life-forms are sheer poison for us. I hope you didn’t swallow much of it.”

“Only a little,” rejoined Roverton. “And maybe the stuff is poisonous — I don’t believe I feel so very well.” A sudden sickness had come upon him, with vertigo and violent internal pains and he sat down on the floor of the cage.

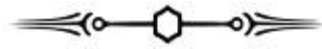
Volmar began to feel a little sick himself; and since he had not eaten any of the tuber, he concluded that the unfamiliar water, and perhaps the air, were contributing to this condition. However, he did not develop the agonizing pains, fever and delirium which progressively characterized Roverton's case. Writhing convulsively, moaning, and out of his head half the time, Roverton lay on the floor while Volmar watched beside him, totally unable, for lack of medicinal remedies or even precise knowledge, to do anything that would palliate his sufferings.

An hour or two passed in this manner without bringing any marked change in the sick man's condition. Absorbed in his vigil, Volmar did not perceive the approach of two dwarfs who had entered the room, till he heard the excited babble of their shrill voices. They were standing beside the cage and were gesticulating with much animation as they peered at himself and Roverton. Volmar was puzzled by their excitement, till he remembered that he and Roverton were now without their masks and the dwarfs had never seen them before in such disattire. Evidently the discovery that the masks were artificial and removable had provoked much interest.

After a minute or so the dwarfs hastened from the room, and soon returned in company with half a dozen others, who surrounded the cage and peered at the earth-men with their bulging, many-angled orbs. Much debate was going on among them; but Volmar was too deeply worried about his comrade's condition to give more than a perfunctory attention to their gestures and crowding faces. Also he was beginning to feel a little light-headed, probably from some element in the air that was ill-suited to human respiration. His brain attached no significance to the re-departure of one of the dwarfs; and even when this being came back a minute later, bearing two of the strange anaesthetic rods, Volmar remembered with apathetic slowness and indifference the former use which had been made of these instruments.

Very quickly and cautiously, one of the dwarfs opened a panel in the cage. Two others, standing in readiness with the rods, thrust their weapons with equal quickness through the opening and applied them to the two men. Instantly, as before, Volmar fell senseless; and the sick, delirious Roverton ceased to moan and mutter and lapsed into merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER IV



THE MEN AWAKENED simultaneously from their second plunge into this mysterious anaesthesia. The circumstances under which they found themselves were even more baffling and more incredible than their confused senses could at first comprehend. It was evident at once that they were no longer on the ether-ship, for the room in which they were lying was very spacious and was walled and roofed and floored with an alabaster-like stone of great luster and beauty. There were many open windows, of an oval form, through which bewildering glimpses of an intricate alien architecture were visible against a violet sky. The impression conveyed was that they were in an upper story of some lofty edifice. The air was pervaded with a tropic warmth.

They were lying on a broad couch, covered with a flossy, mottled material of red and saffron, and inclined at an angle of perhaps fifteen degrees. The room was furnished with several small tables, supported on frail, spidery legs and littered with outlandish implements and quaintly shaped vials such as the surgeons or chemists of an unknown world might employ. Except for Volmar and Roverton, the room was seemingly untenanted.

More curious even than their surroundings, however, were the sensations of the two men. Contrary to all natural expectation, there was no least trace of illness, hunger, thirst or fatigue on the part of either. Also, with a feeling that amounted to stupefaction, both realized that they were breathing a pure, well-oxygenated air — and that they were wearing their masks, which must have been replaced during their period of unconsciousness. It seemed as if

the air-supply in the tanks must in some unaccountable manner have been renewed by their captors. Both men were conscious of a singular buoyancy, a remarkable alertness and bodily well-being.

“Are you all right?” asked Volmar, as he sat up on the couch and turned to Roverton.

“Never better in my life. But I can’t understand why I should feel that way. The last I can remember is being deadly sick in that infernal menagerie cage. And where are we, anyway? It certainly looks as if we had arrived somewhere.”

“I judge,” answered Volmar, “that we are on the particular planetary body to which our captors belong. Plainly, when they found us with our masks off, they realized that we were intelligent beings like themselves, and not mere monsters; and they have been treating us since with more consideration. They must have analyzed the remaining air in our tanks, and then replenished it with a synthetic substitute of their own. What else they’ve done to us I don’t know. But probably we’ll find out before long.”

“Speaking for myself,” said Roverton, “I feel as if I had been well-dined and wined, and had received a shot in the arm to boot. They must have found some way to feed us while we were unconscious — and something non-poisonous and assimilable by the human organism to feed us with.”

“Truly,” admitted Volmar, “it is a remarkable situation. I don’t know how it will all end; but we are lucky to be alive under the circumstances. And no doubt there are some even more extraordinary experiences in store for us.”

“I don’t care how extraordinary they are,” returned Roverton. “I’d rather be back on board the *Alcyone*. What do you suppose Jasper and Deming and the rest are doing anyway? There isn’t one chance in a billion that they could follow us or find out what has happened to us. Probably they are

combing that damned Mercurian planet in an effort to discover what has swallowed us up.”

“They may have seen the departure of the strange ether-ship. Whether or not it would occur to them that we were on board is another matter. And even if they did figure this out, it would be a miracle if they could have done it quickly enough to follow the alien flier, keep it in sight, and locate its destination.”

Before Roverton could reply, he and Volmar saw that three dwarfs were standing beside them. These beings were taller, with a more authoritative bearing, with more delicate antennae and proboscides than the ones they had seen on the space-vessel; and their coloration partook of deep red and orange and Tyrian tones. With queer, jerky genuflections, like nodding insects, they addressed the men. Their words were scarcely articulate to human ears; but an idea of formal courtesy and obeisance was somehow conveyed.

Volmar and Roverton, rising to their feet, returned the greeting in the best manner they could muster.

Plucking the sleeves of the mens’ clothing with their antennal fingers, with elaborate gestures whose meaning was obvious, the dwarfs led the way through an odd, elliptical door that had been concealed from sight in an angle of the wall. Thence, at the end of a short passage, the party emerged on a sort of balcony.

The earth-men gave an involuntary gasp of amazement and were seized by a slight dizziness as they approached the verge; for the balcony was merely a scant ledge without walls, railings or hand-holds of any kind; and below, at an awful depth, were the streets of a monstrous city. It was like looking down from a precipice into some alpine chasm.

All around and above there soared other buildings of the same white material and the same bizarre structure as the one on whose balcony the earth-men were standing. These edifices were of colossal extent and many of them culminated in airy spires and pinnacles of a fairy delicacy, thronging the bright purple heavens like a host of shining obelisks. At frequently recurring intervals, the buildings were connected by bridges of gossamer thinness and fragility, which formed a gleaming web-work in the air. They were wrought of that pale, alabastrine substance; and one of them issued, without sign of jointure, from the narrow ledge at the earth-men's feet, and ran to the midway story of a titan pile that was more than fifty yards distant.

The scene, in its crowding, multiform strangeness, was such as to bewilder and baffle human vision. All was incognizably foreign — a teeming babel of undreamt and baroque architectural forms. Far down in the abysmal streets, and on the lofty bridges, the frail people of the city passed like iridescent motes. All was weirdly silent, apart from certain recurrent rumblings and mutterings which seemed to come from underground, like the pulsing of hidden, gigantic engineries.

Spell-bound by the vision, and dazed by its vistas, Volmar and Roverton became slowly aware that one of their guides had stepped from the balcony to the bridge and was signing them to follow.

“Holy smoke!” was Roverton's exclamation. “Are we supposed to walk on that?”

The railless bridge was barely a yard in width, and the drop to the street was terrific — at least a full half-mile. The guide, however, seemed to possess the equilibrium of a bird or an insect. His two companions were standing behind the earth-men, and were armed with weapons like double-

pointed goads. As Volmar and Roverton hesitated, these beings came forward, lifting the formidable points in a gesture of menace.

“Well,” said Volmar, “I guess we’d better move along. After all, the bridge isn’t quite so bad as a tight-rope.”

The earth-men followed their guide, who was tripping lightly and unconcernedly before them. Accustomed though they were to cosmic elevations, they still did not care to peer downward at the dreadful gulfs on either hand, but kept their eyes on the balcony ahead. With short and careful paces, they managed to cross the long, attenuated span. It seemed to take them a long time; and they gained their goal with much relief.

Looking back from their new vantage, they saw that the building they had left was much lower than those around it, and possessed a flat, towerless roof. Several glittering vessels, similar to the one in which they had travelled through space from the Mercurian world, were lying on the edge of this roof, which was plainly a landing-stage for such craft. Beyond, were rows of high towers, some of which were inclined at oblique angles and were inter-connected in the same fashion as the main structures.

They were now conducted into the heart of the edifice in which that precarious bridge had ended. Through labyrinthine corridors, and down slanting floors and serpentine stairs with awkward little steps, they were led for a distance impossible to estimate. They soon passed from purple daylight to the red, unflickering glare of columnar flames that issued from black, funnel-shaped vases.

The building appeared to be a sort of scientific laboratory. On every hand, in rooms of an asymmetrical construction, they saw the curious apparatus of a foreign and inconceivably advanced chemistry. People of the dwarf race were busy everywhere with arcanic tests and abstruse labors. They paid little heed to the earth-men, and were intently absorbed in the

queer crucibles, vats, alembics and other mechanisms of a less classifiable nature which they tended.

At last the earthlings and their guides entered a vast room, filled with transparent cages, most of which were occupied by fearsome and variegated monsters. Among these, the men recognized certain of their former companions in captivity. Some of the creatures had been rendered unconscious; and dwarfs wearing atmospheric masks had entered their cages and by means of little suction-pumps attached to crystalline vials were extracting various amounts of the life-fluids, or perhaps of certain special glandular secretions, from the moveless monsters. Somewhat sickened, Volmar and Roverton watched the flowing of diverse-colored fluids into the vials as they went by.

“So that’s the game,” was Roverton’s comment. “But I wonder what they use the stuff for.”

“There’s no telling. Those fluids may provide valuable serums for aught we know; or they may be used in the compounding of drugs, or even be employed as food.”

Passing between endless rows of cages, they reached an open space at the center of the huge apartment. Here, from floor to ceiling, there ran a great circular upright tube of the same transparent material as the cages. It was at least eight feet in diameter. Pausing before it, the guide touched its apparently unbroken surface with his fingers, and a section of the wall swung open on almost invisible hinges, leaving a small doorway. Volmar and Roverton were motioned to enter.

They obeyed, with much wonder and dubiety, and the door was closed upon them. They found that they were standing on a floor of some nacreous mineral. Above them, where it met the ceiling at a height of thirty feet, the tube ended in a dull, greyish disk.

“Now what?” Roverton’s voice was unnaturally loud and resonant in the closed columnar space.

A number of the laboratory attendants had gathered and were standing about the tube with their fantastic faces pressed against its wall. As if in answer to Roverton’s query, one of them raised his arm with a swift and sweeping gesture.

It must have been a signal. Immediately, as if some hidden switch had been turned on, the earth-men were dazzled by a ruddy light that fell upon them from above. Glancing up, they saw that the grey disk had become luminous as a great fiery jewel. Soon the radiance changed from red to green, and then from green to blue, from blue to violet, from violet to an insupportable whiteness fraught with the imminence of ultra-spectral hues. Looking down, through the blurs of color that clung to their vision, the men saw that the floor was glowing like molten metal and was becoming translucent beneath the weird ray.

Then, all at once, they perceived an even stranger thing. Each saw that the vitriolene of his companion’s suit had grown transparent, revealing every feature of head and body. Then the flesh itself grew gradually diaphanous, showing every bone and internal organ as if floating in some clear solution. Stage by stage, not with the mere shadowing of the X-ray, but with full color and minutest detail, the process went on, while the outer portions turned to a ghostly outline. Simultaneously, the men were aware of an icy sensation, that seemed to pierce their very vitals inch by inch along with the penetrating beam.

They felt a strange faintness, as if they were becoming actually insubstantial. All about them seemed to waver and recede, and they saw as from a fluctuating distance the intent, unreadable staring of the dwarfs.

The white ray was suddenly turned off, and the men resumed their normal tangibility of aspect. Both, however, were still faint and chilly from the unfamiliar force to which they had been subjected.

The door was opened, and they were signalled to come forth. They tottered with a queer weakness as they stepped out into the main room.

The dwarfs began to disperse, till only the three guides remained. Volmar and Roverton, reeling with a sickness that persisted and grew upon them, were led through halls and chambers of which they were hardly half-cognizant, and were thrust into a small room whose door was then closed with a gong-like clang. The room was occupied by four dwarfs who wore atmospheric masks, and was filled with mysterious implements that were sinister as those of a torture-chamber.

Here the men were directed to remove their suits and helmets. They obeyed, recovering sufficient mental clarity to realize that the air in the shut room was the same that they had been breathing from their tanks. Evidently it had been prepared for their reception.

Neither could remember fully afterwards the complicated and peculiar tests through which they were put during the next hour. Ill and confused and faint, they were dimly conscious of multiform instruments that were applied to their bodies, of changing lights that blinded them, of the purring and clicking of coiled mechanisms, and the high sibilant voices of their examiners conferring together. It was an ordeal such as no human beings had ever before undergone.

Toward the end, through clouds of numbness and confusion, they felt a stinging sensation in their chests, and each realized vaguely that an incision had been made in his flesh with a tiny tusk-like knife and that suction-pumps of the same type as those employed in drawing animal fluids from the caged monsters were being applied to these incisions. Dully and half-

obliviously, they watched the blood that was drawn slowly through thin black elastic tubes into squat-bellied bottles of gill capacity. Their brains were unable to attach any real meaning to this process; and it would not have occurred to them to resist. They accepted it as part of a senseless and troublous delirium.

Both were on the point of virtual collapse from increasing malaise. They scarcely noticed when the tubes were withdrawn and the filled bottles corked and laid carefully aside. Nor did they perceive the subsequent action of their examiners till there came a sharp prickling in their shoulders. Almost instantly their senses cleared, and they saw that a light-green fluid was being injected into their veins by transparent hypodermics with double needles curved like serpents' teeth.

The fluid must have been a powerful drug, for every sign of illness or even nervousness disappeared within a minute or two after its administration. Both men felt the same sense of well-being, of mental alertness and physical fitness and buoyancy, with which they had awakened from their last period of unconsciousness. They surmised that they were not experiencing the effects of the drug for the first time.

"Well," remarked Roverton, "that dope is what you might call an all-round panacea. I don't feel as if there ever had been or ever could be anything the matter with me. The stuff seems to take the place of food, drink and medicine."

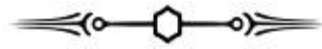
"It's a pretty fair tonic," agreed Volmar. "But watch out for the possible hang-over."

Now, with returning normality, they observed the vials of drawn blood; and the memory of what had happened came back to them with a new potentiality of significance.

“I hope,” said Roverton, “that these people will be satisfied before they reach the dissection stage. Apparently they mean to learn all they can about us. Do you suppose they are trying to determine our fitness to become citizens of their world?”

“That’s not so unlikely. Or perhaps they are trying to find out what use they can make of us, what particular sort of serum or gland-extract we might afford. Personally, I have an intuition that there is something pretty horrible behind all this.”

CHAPTER V



THE EXAMINATION WAS seemingly over. The men were signalled to resume their clothing and helmets. Then the door was opened, and they were permitted to emerge. Their examiners followed, bringing the vials of blood, and removing the masks which had been worn for protection in that specially prepared atmosphere.

Many of the dwarfs in the outer room thronged curiously around and seemed to be questioning the examiners. These beings, however, were intent on some purpose of their own, and gave brief answers to the inquiries as they led Volmar and Roverton through the clustering laboratory workers and down a hall where the customary red flames that illumined the building were succeeded by others of a cold lunar blue.

Their destination proved to be a circular apartment with similar lighting. Here a dozen dwarfs were gathered, as if to await the earth-men and their conductors. All were the usual type in regard to size, formation and markings, with the exception of two who appeared to represent a cruder and more primitive tribe of the same race, with duller coloring and less finely developed proboscides and antennae.

Most of them were seated on spidery-looking stools arranged in a semi-circle. Some were armed with anaesthetic rods, and others carried instruments or weapons that consisted of thin ebon-black shafts with glowing cones of a cold green fire, possibly radio-active, at one end. The two who suggested an aboriginal type were standing, and neither carried any weapon or implement. Near them was a little table on which hypodermics and other instruments were displayed.

“What’s all this? Another test?” muttered Roverton.

“We’ll soon see.”

Two of the examiners, each bearing one of the vials of human blood in his delicate, sinuous fingers, came forward and conferred with the seated beings.

Then, by the former, two crystal hypodermics were filled with blood from the vials. Their bearers approached the aboriginals, who maintained a stolid and indifferent air, and proceeded to puncture the abdomens of their ant-shapen bodies with the fang-like needles and inject the blood till the hypodermics were empty.

All the assembled beings looked on in attentive silence, like a medical conclave. Volmar and Roverton, fascinated and a little horrified by this mysterious experiment, were unable to speak.

“Trying it on the dogs, eh?” Roverton finally whispered.

Volmar made no answer; and the words had barely passed Roverton’s lips when the two aboriginals suddenly lost their impassivity and began to leap and twist as if in terrible pain. Then they fell to the floor with vehement cries that were half hisses, half shrieks. Both were swelling visibly, as if from the effects of some deadly poison; and the dull-hued integument of their bodies was blackening moment by moment. The injected venom of a hundred cobras could not have produced a more immediate or more appalling result.

“Who could have imagined that?” said Volmar, in low tones of dismay and consternation.

“It certainly looks as if human blood didn’t mix very well with the life-fluid of these creatures.” Roverton was too horrified to make any further or crisper comment.

The convulsions of the agonized victims were lessening by ghastly degrees; and their cries grew fainter, like the hiss of dying serpents. Their heads, bodies, and even their antennae, were puffed beyond recognition and had turned to a putrid purple-black. With a few final spasms and twitches, they lay still and did not stir again.

“Ugh! I hope the doctors are satisfied with their experiment.” It was Roverton who spoke. He and Volmar tore their eyes away from the ghastly sight on the floor in time to see that one of the seated conclave-members had risen and was moving toward them, lifting as he came the ebon shaft with fiery terminal cone which he carried.

The use of this implement, the nature of the cold green flame, and the purpose of its bearer, were all equally uncertain. As the men afterwards reflected, the dwarf’s intentions were not necessarily hostile, and may have been those of mere curiosity. But their nerves were on edge with all the cryptical, uncanny adventures and experiences they had gone through, and following on the hideous outcome of the experiment they had just beheld, the sudden movement of the dwarf was fraught with connotations of unknowable menace.

Roverton, who stood a little in advance of Volmar, sprang to one side before the dwarf, and seized the fragile-looking table that was supported on tarantula-like legs. Hypodermics, vials, and other utensils of an unknown medical art clattered on the floor, as he lifted the table and held it in front of him like a shield. Then, facing the suspected assailant, he began to retreat toward the open door with Volmar at his side.

The dwarf, it would seem, was puzzled or confounded by this action for an instant. He paused, then came on with a loud, sibilant cry, waving his weapon. His confreres, rising from their seats in a body, also followed, and

ran to intercept the men before they could escape from the room. Their movements were quick as the darting of angry insects.

Swinging the table aloft, Roverton hurled it in the face of his attacker. The creature was beaten down, releasing the lambent-headed wand as he fell; and it shot forward and dropped at Roverton's feet. In a flash, Roverton picked it up, and he and Volmar sprang for the door.

Two dwarfs, fleeter than the others, had managed to head them off and were standing on the threshold. Both were armed with the familiar anaesthetic rods.

Not knowing the properties of the implement which he had snatched from its fallen bearer, but surmising that it must have some efficacious use, Roverton charged the two beings in the doorway. His superior length of arm enabled him to smite one of them on the breast with the green cone, while he himself avoided their paralyzing weapons. The effect of his blow was amazing and terrific: the glowing cone, whatever it was, seemed to burn an instant way through the bodily substance of the dwarf, like white-hot iron in butter. The creature fell dead with a dark and gaping hole in his bosom, and Roverton, surprised and thrown off his balance, barely evaded the outflung rod of the other.

However, with a deftness that would have done honor to a professional swordsman, he swerved his weapon, almost continuing its initial movement, and smote the body of the second dwarf, who went down beside the first.

All this had occurred in a mere fraction of time, and a split-second of faltering or a single misstep would have been fatal. The earth-men leapt across the fallen bodies and cleared the threshold just in time to evade the main group of their pursuers.

They were in a long corridor, wholly deserted for the nonce, which led on one hand to the huge room of monster-cages, and on the other to parts as

yet unknown. They chose the latter direction. Their situation was irredeemably desperate, and even if they could escape from the building, they would find themselves hemmed in at every turn by the perils and pitfalls of a world inevitably hostile to human life through its very strangeness. But, after their captivity, and the queer ordeals to which they had perforce submitted, it was good to move freely again, even though their flight could only end in recapture or the unconceived horror of some strange death.

They sprinted down the corridor, with a dozen dwarfs at their heels, and found that their longer legs would enable them to distance their pursuers by degrees. At intervals they met others of the laboratory attendants, mostly unarmed, who all leapt back in obvious terror before the lethal wand that Roverton brandished in their faces.

The earth-men also encountered a sleepy-looking monster, like a sort of wingless dragon, which was probably a pet. It was lying stretched across the hall; and it gave a torpid and protesting bellow as they hurdled its spiny back and continued their flight.

The corridor, lit by unwavering rubescent flames, ran straight for an interminable distance, and then turned at a sharp angle. Through open doors, or either side, the fleeing earth-men caught outlandish glimpses of incomprehensible activities.

Again the corridor turned, at a reverse angle; and its ruddy flames were succeeded by the glaring mauve of daylight. Volmar and Roverton emerged on a narrow balcony as the ever-swelling swarm of their pursuers came in sight.

Before them again was the vast, bewildering vision of the white city, with its web of alabaster bridges woven gossamer-wise between buildings that were alabaster mountains with multi-angled scarps and strange

pinnacles. It was noon in this world, for the sun which they knew as an unnamed star in Serpens, poured down from a vertical elevation the cruel and tyrannic splendor of its super-tropic beams to illumine the vertigo-breeding depth of the chasmal streets below.

The balcony, or ledge, was barely seven feet in width, and like all others in this preternatural architecture, was void of walls or railings. Doubtless it circled the whole edifice; and at frequent intervals there were bridges which connected it with the balconies of other mammoth piles.

Blinded by the glare and shrinking from the dreadful gulfs, the men followed the ledge for some distance, but paused in consternation when a horde of dwarfs issued from a door-way just ahead. These beings, it was plain, had been sent to intercept them.

The first group of pursuers, which now numbered at least a score, was closing in from behind. There were no accessible doors or windows by which to re-enter the building; and the only means of continuing their flight was to cross one of those appalling bridges.

“Here goes,” cried Roverton, panting, as he led the way along the slender span. The bridge was unoccupied; but it seemed preferable that he, being armed, should go first in case of possible opposition.

It was a mad race. The men dared not slacken their speed, for their pursuers, two abreast, were crowding the bridge behind them like ants. The danger of being overtaken gave them an added coolness and poise, and they ran with flying leaps on a path where even the least indecision or miscalculation might have plunged them into the abyss.

They were nearing the opposing pile, when three dwarfs armed with the paralyzing rods, emerged from a door in its cyclopean mass and ran forward to meet them on the bridge.

Holding his own weapon like a lance, Roverton faced these beings without hesitation. It was a perilous combat, for two of them were side by side, and he could dispose of only one at a time. He struck and parried with lightning agility; and the two, with yawning holes in their thoraxes from the impact of the fearsome igneous cone, went down in swift succession and hurtled into the half-mile chasm beneath. The third, however, had advanced within reach of Roverton, and thrust viciously with his rod.

Roverton dodged, and would have lost his footing as he teetered within an inch of the verge, if Volmar, standing close behind, had not put out an arm to steady him. Missing, the third dwarf ran headlong upon Roverton's weapon, which pierced him through till his body hung impaled on the ebon shaft. Roverton disengaged it, and kicked the falling corpse aside to join its companions in the gulf.

The earth-men reached the opposite building without further interruption; but their pursuers had gained appreciably during the combat and were dogging them closely as they plunged into the new edifice.

This building, as far as they could tell, was wholly deserted; and it differed materially in its furnishings and apparent use from the one they had left. The unpeopled rooms into which they glanced as they hurried along a main hall, were panelled with fantastic paintings and designs that might have been astronomical maps. In some of them, there were huge globes and hemispheres of metal, and appliances like alien cosmospheres and planispheres.

An angle of the hall took the men temporarily beyond sight of their pursuers.

"Quick! Let's find a hiding-place or a stairway," whispered Roverton.

They hesitated before a little door which gave on a dark chamber where the beams of the red fires in the hall were powerless to penetrate. Then, in

an alcove, they perceived a flight of stairs.

Trusting that their pursuers would continue along the corridor, they began to ascend the stairs, taking three or four of the tiny steps at a leap. They would have preferred to descend, with the hope of eventually finding themselves on some sort of Terra Firma, but were deterred by an inexplicable noise, a metallic whirring and jarring, that suddenly started on the floors below. Above, there was utter silence.

“Haven’t these people any elevator systems?” asked Roverton, after they had climbed steadily for several minutes. “It must take them all eternity to go up and down in their skyscrapers like this.”

“There may be some other method of transit, though probably it wouldn’t be of any use to us without special knowledge regarding its mechanism.”

For hours, it seemed, the earth-men toiled from story to story of that interminable edifice. The sounds of pursuit had died out; and apparently the dwarfs were still seeking them on lower levels. They met no one in all that endless range of red-lit stairs and rooms. All had grown silent, except for the subterranean rumblings from beneath the city, which became fainter as they went upward. They must have been in the heart of the building; and at no time did they approach the outer rooms and balconies or attain even a far-off glimpse of sunlight. They ceased to count the number of floors they had ascended, and it seemed to them that they were lost in some awful, topless tower of eternity and infinity. They marvelled at the mania for space and magnitude which must have prompted this tiny people to rear such colossal structures.

Their legs were turning to lead, and each added step was like the heaving of a mighty weight. They gasped for breath within their aerated helmets,

and heard the pounding of heavy pulses in their temples like the roar of driven torrents.

“Where are we going, anyway?” questioned Roverton, as they paused for a momentary respite. “And why are we going there? The end is a foregone conclusion, with all the cards that are stacked against us. There must be about a million deadly contingencies, I should think. We’ll do well if we live long enough to exhaust our present supply of air.”

“The air of this particular world might not be fatal to us,” said Volmar. “We haven’t sampled it yet, if you’ll remember. Our dwarf friends were considerate enough, evidently, to re-fill our tanks with a chemical synthesis of the same air that they found in them.”

“Well, I’d rather not try the local atmosphere till I have to. But what’s the use of climbing any further? We’ve got the whole planet against us. Probably there are billions of these dwarfs with their devilish chemistry, all of them ready to hunt us down like wild beasts.”

“Why worry about a little thing like that? Come on — there should be a good view from the top of this tower of Babel, when we get to it.”

Following the slow, tedious spiral of the stairs, at length they saw a gleam of purple daylight above them, and came out on the building’s roof, where a single central spire continued to escalate the heavens. The flat roof itself was crowded with orb-like mechanisms that were perhaps used for the observation of solar and stellar force. Crystal wheels and spheres were turning silently within larger spheres of the same substance.

No one was in sight, and the roof was seemingly unoccupied. But several air-craft were approaching, and fearing to be seen by their occupants, the earth-men entered a door in the great spire. Here they found a staircase, and resumed their eternal climb.

At the top they emerged in a curious open cupola whose lofty dome was filled with large perforations. The place was lined with instruments that were doubtless astronomical. There were cosmolabes and armillaries designed for a universe not measured heretofore by man; there were strange double and triple mirrors of white mineral with surfaces of baffling convex angles; there were lenses arranged behind each other in curving, semi-circular frames, and adjusted to an unhuman vision. In the center of the alabastrine floor, the men perceived a sable disk, perhaps four feet in diameter, and depressed about six inches below the floor-level. From the middle of the disk, and close together, there rose two upright rods.

At first they did not see that the cupola was occupied. Then, behind the litter of strange appliances, they perceived a wizened and aged-looking dwarf, bowed above a sort of dial on which was slanting rows of rubricated ciphers. He was unarmed, and did not hear the earth-men till they were close upon him. Then he turned and saw them.

Ungovernably startled, it would seem, by the apparition of beings who must have been supremely monstrous from his view-point, he darted away from the dial and sprang toward the black disk. Roverton intercepted him, being dubious on general principles regarding the intention of this movement. Terrified by the glowing weapon which the earth-men waved in his face, the dwarf circled back among the crowded instruments and contrived to elude both Volmar and Roverton and win the head of the stairs. There he disappeared from their ken at breakneck speed.

“Too bad we didn’t get him,” said Roverton. “I wasn’t anxious to hurt that fellow, but now he’ll spread the good word among the others as to where we are hiding. The whole pack will be here presently, if not sooner.”

“Well, let’s take a look at the view anyway, being as we’re here.”

They stepped to the verge of the open cupola, which was supported on a circle of thin pillars, and looked out on a staggering scene. They could see the whole extent of the mighty city, which reached for many miles in every direction, lying below them at a depth which turned the people in its streets to microscopic motes. Around the city was a landscape of ineffable bizarrerie, with wide canals of blood-red water that intersected each other to form terraced isles, and then wound away through fields and forests of a vegetation whose coloring was more violent than that of futuristic paintings. Beyond it all, in sharp, airless outline on the violescent heavens, were horn-like mountains of jetty black and others of a whiteness more dazzling than that of Pentelic marble.

“Golly,” was Roverton’s ejaculation. “The outlook is almost worth the climb. But I’d rather be seeing it from the *Alcyone*.”

There came a confused babel of shrilling voices, and a horde of dwarfs emerged on the roof below them and streamed toward the central spire.

“They couldn’t have been so very far behind us, after all,” Volmar commented. “And of course our friend the astronomer had told them how we invaded his observatory and dispossessed him.”

Roverton was considering the various instruments in the cupola with an estimating eye. Some of them were set in the floor by means of metal bars and pivots, but many others were detached or loosely mounted. He picked up a singular object consisting of no less than seven concave lenses framed among rods and wires of a malachite-colored metal. It was satisfyingly heavy and would make an effective missile.

“We can hold the stairs while the ammunition lasts,” he said.

Volmar was lifting a small armillary to try its weight. Between them, the men collected everything movable in a great pile at the stair-head. They had no sooner finished doing this, when the foremost of their pursuers came in

sight. The winding steps were packed with these creatures, most of whom were furnished with anaesthetic rods, ignescent wands, and other odd weapons.

The men began to hurl their fantastic missiles at the throng — a barrage of metal orbs and mirrors, and queer-angled things which may have served the purpose of telescopes, eye-glasses, and spectroscopes. The front rows of assailants were driven back with crushed heads and broken limbs, and many were slain or paralyzed by their own weapons as they went down in a tangled mass that blocked the stairway.

In an orderly manner, seemingly unperturbed by all these casualties, the dwarfs proceeded to clear away their dead and wounded, and then came on as before. More were swept down by the remainder of the observatory's detachable paraphernalia; and much havoc in particular was inflicted by two armillaries which Volmar raised in his arms and sent crashing into the vanward files.

The supply of missiles was now exhausted; but Roverton still retained his death-dealing wand, and Volmar had reserved a sort of lens-apparatus which he intended to use as a mace when their attackers came within reach.

With the same hideous, unhuman imperturbability, after halting long enough to remove the victims of that final barrage, the dwarfs resumed their advance, while the earth-men awaited them at the stair-head.

Roverton, quick-eared and alert, as he watched the thronging onset, was aware of an odd noise from behind, as if something had clashed lightly against the cupola. Turning, he perceived that an air-vessel, shaped somewhat in the fashion of a long, crescent-prowed barge, but without wings or any visible agency of levitation, had attached itself by coiling tendril-like chains to the cupola-columns, and was discharging a dozen dwarfs into the observatory.

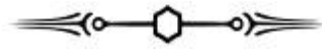
Roverton called Volmar's attention to the new danger.

"If you can hold the stairs, Captain, I'll tend to these customers," he said, and sprang to meet the invaders. These latter were furnished with weapons of a kind which the earth-men had not hitherto encountered — long, trumpet-like tubes, which they levelled immediately at Roverton. Their curling fingers played on certain knobs which studded the tubes, and from the mouth of each weapon there issued a jet of pearly vapor. All were aiming at Roverton's head, and he surmised that the vapor was some sort of deadly gas or anaesthetic. The goggles of his mask were blinded by the fumes, and he could see nothing as he groped among the strange paraphernalia in the dome.

Tripping against some unseen object, and trying to save himself from a fall, he lurched forward and stepped down with a terrific jar on the broad central disk that was set below the floor-level.

Clear of the pearly fumes, which still played overhead, he saw his assailants for an instant, crowding toward him with their weird weapons, as he clutched with his free hand at one of the upright rods which rose from the disk. Then he heard Volmar cry out, and turned his head toward the Captain, jerking the rod involuntarily as he did so. He saw in the merest flash of time that Volmar had fallen, and was half-hidden by the dwarfs who thronged about him from the stairs. Then the scene vanished, as if a black curtain had rushed upward from it, and Roverton realized that the disk was dropping away beneath him with dizzy velocity in a long, dark shaft.

CHAPTER VI



HE SURMISED THAT he was in a sort of elevator. The jerking of the rod as he steadied himself in turning toward Volmar had started its downward flight. The thing was falling like a plummet, and he clung to the rod to keep from striking the walls of the shaft.

Soon, in the darkness, there came a series of red flashes, almost merging with one another. These must indicate openings from the shaft into the various floors of the main building. Doubtless, by manipulating one or other of the rods, he could check or reverse his descent. For a moment, he thought of trying to do the latter. He would go back to the tower and die fighting beside the fallen Volmar. But Volmar was dead — and what was the use? Heart-sick, lost, unutterably confused and bewildered, he felt a black weariness descend upon him like the clinging of some material thing. His remaining will was broken, his initiative was crushed beneath it.

With a dull fatalism, a leaden despair, he watched the red flashes. There must be hundreds of them, he thought. He was plunging down to a world whose actual soil neither he nor any other man had yet trodden; before the end came, he would perhaps attain a glimpse of maddening, insuperable mysteries, and would pierce a little further among the all-encompassing terrors and perils of a hostile planet. He resigned himself. He was not yet weaponless, for the lethal wand, with its green cone glowing brightly in the darkness, was still clutched in his right hand.

Abruptly, with no noise or jarring, the elevator came to a full stop. Roverton's limbs and body were inundated by a stream of saffron light which poured into the shaft through a low doorway. At the same time, his

ears were assailed by a medley of rumbling sounds and deep metallic throbbings which appeared to come from all around him. He had the feeling that he was underground, that his descent had precipitated him from that topmost tower into the nether vaults of the colossal city.

Cautiously he stooped and squeezed himself through the opening, which could afford ample passage for beings like the opalescent dwarfs but was rather scanty for a full-grown earth-man. Blinking in the saffron brilliance, he peered about him on a chamber so enormous, of such indeterminate scope that it seemed to partake of infinitude. It was filled with gigantic engines that appeared to use and combine every possible geometric form in their overbeetling bulks of dark stone and burnished metal. The yellow light emanated from a sort of open vat or furnace in which was a glowing mass of molten substance. There were other flaming furnaces at intervals, and great red eyes that burned in many of the machines, pouring down a lurid effulgence.

From some of the mechanisms, huge, ramifying pipes went up and vanished in the darkness of a funnel-like dome. In the wildly flickering patches of light, and monstrous masses of shadow, Roverton saw dim, titanic figures, but did not realize at first that they were living beings. They were ten or twelve feet in height, and were strange and uncouth as the mechanisms which they tended. There were also two or three dwarfs among them, who appeared to be supervising their labors.

Roverton surmised that he had stumbled into a power-plant of some unknown kind. The giants, mayhaps, were members of a subject people enslaved by the dwarfs and compelled to toil in their subterranean vaults.

The nearest furnace, watched by a single giant, was fifty feet away, and its warder had his back to Roverton. Hoping to escape observation in the vastness and gloom of the chamber, the earth-man started to make his way

toward certain of the towering mechanisms that were dark and seemingly untended. He had no idea where he was going or what he would find; and he had reached the exhaustion point, both physically and mentally. The drug injected by the dwarfs seemed to be dying out in his veins, and he tottered with an intermittent weakness. Also, he was stunned by the loss of Volmar, his Captain and comrade. His brain, his senses, his muscles, were no longer functioning normally. It did not even occur to him that he might have stayed in the elevator shaft and found his way back to some other level where escape would not offer so many hazards.

He had nearly reached the shadow of a huge pyramidal mechanism, when one of the giants saw him and started in pursuit. The creature came on with lumbering, elephantine paces, and looking back as he fled, Roverton saw its face for the first time in the lurid furnace-glare. The thing was a biological nightmare, with one swollen, blazing, sulphur-yellow eye where the mouth would be in a human face, and all the rest a mass of writhing, viperish tentacles around a central slit. The limbs and body were no less monstrous than the face.

Roverton ran, in an access of horror-stimulated strength; and doubling in and out among the dark machines, he contrived to throw his clumsy pursuer off the track. But there were harsh roarings, audible above the noise of the engines, which indicated that others were joining in the chase. Also, he heard the shrill, sweet sibilation of one of the supervising dwarfs.

Luckily, this part of the chamber was untenanted. He ran madly, interminably in the semi-darkness, and came at last to the chamber's end. Here he discovered a dimly yawning exit, and plunged headlong through it on an inclined plane, going downward at an angle of twenty degrees. The plane led to another vault, deserted and perhaps disused, where he would have found himself in utter darkness if it had not been for the glowing wand

which he still carried. By its weird light, he saw the looming bulks of other massive engineering.

Hastening on between rows of these mechanisms, he heard the roar of pursuit and saw the red flare of moving lights behind him in the gloom. He fled on through an eternity of cyclopean metal cones and cylinders, of black retorts and flameless furnaces, and reached another exit. This led into what was plainly a natural cavern, with rough nodular walls in which he caught the glistening of pale, mercurial ores.

The cavern turned and twisted like a serpent, and soon began to narrow. Its floor and sides were damp with drippings, were mottled with a soft, oozy marl. His feet slipped in puddles from which loathly creatures, half-batrachian, half-insect, writhed and wriggled in sluggish alarm to avoid his feet.

With dimming senses and failing muscles, he still went on. His mind was becoming a partial blank: he had almost forgotten everything that had happened, and the horror of it all was a vague amorphous blur. Even his own identity was doubtful as a half-remembered dream. He was only a dying atom of consciousness, lost in a monstrous world without meaning or reason, without boundary or end.

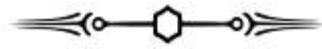
Slowly, obscurely, he perceived that something was retarding his progress. Long, whitish ropes and tendrils were hanging in a curtain from the cavern-roof; and he had blundered into them without seeing. What they were he could not imagine. His brain groped for analogies, for similes that he could not recall.

The ropes and tendrils seemed to be twining about him, growing over him, enmeshing him from head to foot like a web of whip-snakes; and some of them recoiled and twisted with an undulating motion at the touch of the fiery-headed wand in his hand.

Roverton fought instinctively to free himself, in a nightmare of dim terror and exhaustion. He swayed back and forth but the ropy meshes held tenaciously. He sank into a half-swoon, and the wand fell from his fingers; but he himself did not fall, but was supported by the clinging growths. What these were he never knew; but doubtless they belonged to some type of organism mid-way between the vegetable and animal kingdoms.

He heard voices, and saw a flash of light on the pale, hundred-stranded web that held him. With a start of returning consciousness, he knew that his pursuers had found him. But it did not seem to matter greatly. Nothing mattered, now that he had lost Volmar and had gone astray in the clueless labyrinth of a dark infinity.

CHAPTER VII



ROVERTON'S MEMORIES OF what followed were partial and fragmentary. There were starts of full awareness during a period of semi-oblivion, in which he realized that he was being carried by the boa-thick arms of one of the giant laborers who had pursued him. By flashes of sullen, lurching light, he saw the unthinkable face of this creature above him, and saw the indistinct bulks of the subterranean mechanisms.

He seemed to go on for aeons in some underground avenue, cradled by an ever-swaying movement that lulled him to a troubled drowsiness. Then, all at once, though he knew not how nor where, he was going upward in a great abyss of darkness toward some far-off, watching eye of light, and metal chains were about him in lieu of the giant arms. He closed his lids to avert a feeling of dizziness. Then, after a little, his swoon became complete; and he saw no more till he opened his eyes in a glaring radiance.

For awhile he could recall nothing of all that happened to him, could understand nothing on which he gazed. His eyes were half-blinded by a pitiless light, were assailed and stabbed by stupendous imageries. He seemed to be looking down into a violet-purple gulf, in which hung the inverted alabaster walls and portals and towers of a gigantic architecture; and he himself was suspended, as if by some reverse gravitation, from the bottom of this topsy-turvy world.

Then, all at once, he had the feeling that he was not alone. Turning his head with a great effort, he found to his incredulous amazement that Volmar, bound with thick leathery-looking cords to pegs in a metallic surface, was hanging beside him.

Whether Volmar was dead or alive, he could not yet know. The closed lids beneath the goggles of the Captain's mask were wan and still as marble. But Roverton felt a joyous surprise that they were together again, and the emotion served to revive him and clarify his muddled faculties. Yet he feared to speak, lest Volmar should not answer him.

There was an instant of uncanny *bouleversement*, while all about him seemed to whirl and circle like a mighty wheel. Then he knew that he was lying on his back and was staring up at the heavens between the buildings of that city to which he and Volmar had been conveyed in the alien ether-ship.

He tried to sit up, and discovered that he also was bound by means of leathery cords to the metal surface. His head alone was free, and twisting as far as he could, he saw that the Captain and himself were in the center of a wide street or square, with the people of the city standing about them in a solemn, silent crowd. The men were tied to something that appeared to be a sort of platform. Its area was indefinite, but it could not have risen more than a foot above the street-level.

Roverton, felt the enigmatic gaze of the nacre-colored dwarfs, who were all looking on in absolute stillness. Beyond their crowding heads, beyond the myriad structures, at the end of an almost infinite avenue, he beheld a sinking sun that had nearly touched the horizon and was ringing the white towers with supernal rose and amethyst.

What was to happen, he wondered? Were he and Volmar destined as a sacrifice to some ultra-sidereal deity? Were they to be the victims of some occult, unknowable scientific experiment? The silence of the throng about them was laden with a meaning which he could not apprehend, and was ominous with unreadable secrets of a trans-cosmic psychology. He knew nothing, never would know anything, of this incomprehensible race.

The dead, utter silence was broken by a loud click, followed by a whirring sound as of some metal wheel or spring. The world beneath Roverton seemed to quiver and surge, the staring faces disappeared from his vision, and he saw that the thing to which Volmar and himself had been bound was rising rapidly in air among the fantastic bridges and structures of the white city.

Balconies rushed by him, he caught flying glimpses of the dwarf people who were passing to and fro on slender spans. Then he was level with the roofs and towers, and as these fell away beneath him, he had once more that horrible sensation of hanging downward, and felt that he was sinking into some unfathomable gulf. About him now there was nothing but empty space.

“Where are we?” A feeble voice had spoken at his side.

“Are you really alive?” cried Roverton, as he turned toward Volmar and saw that the pale eyelids had opened.

“Apparently we’re both alive, incredible as the fact may be. But that isn’t answering my question as to where we are.”

“As far as I can tell, we are on some sort of anti-gravitational raft and are headed for outer space. Our hosts, it would seem, have definitely decided that you and I are undesirable aliens in their world.... But what happened to you in the tower? The last I saw, you had fallen; and I thought surely you were dead.”

“I’ve certainly been dead to the particular planet which you say we are quitting. Those fellows started throwing their anaesthetic rods at me, while you were fighting the crew from the air-ship. One of them got me with the business-end — and that is the whole story as far as I am concerned. I suppose yours is about the same.”

Roverton gave the Captain a brief outline of his own adventures, as well as he could recollect them.

“Then there was an elevator,” said Volmar. “I wondered about that black disk the astronomer was in such a hurry to reach.”

“It’s a wonder they didn’t kill us outright, considering all the damage we inflicted,” was Roverton’s comment after a minute of silence. “Maybe they didn’t mean to hurt us at all, in the beginning.”

“Yes,” said Volmar sadly, “we may have misunderstood them. Certainly that can happen all too easily, between members of such wholly divergent races, who have no medium of communication and, in all likelihood, no ideas or motivations in common.”

Their ascent had continued at an undiminished rate. Though they were soaring into full sunlight, the sky had darkened rapidly and was taking on the ebon of ultra-atmospheric space. Stars were visible everywhere. They must be penetrating the planet’s envelope of air; and they would soon reach the interstellar ether. The warmth of the world below had given place to a boreal cold that made itself felt through their insulated clothing.

“Well, I guess this is the end,” said Volmar. “You and I will continue our spatial voyage indefinitely — but we won’t be in a condition to know anything about it. A few more minutes and we will freeze so stiff that we could be broken into powder with a hammer. Then we will drift on in space, among the whirling suns and systems, and perhaps afford a third-rate meteor for some world whose gravitational influence is strong enough to attract the mechanism on which we are bound.”

“Yes, I suppose it’s the end. Well, good-bye, Captain.”

“Good-bye, Roverton.”

The cold stung like a million needles, then the stinging became blunted and both men began to feel drowsy. They would have fought the

drowsiness, but there seemed to be no use in prolonging their period of suffering. Numbly, somnolently, they resigned themselves to the inevitable Lethe and closed their eyes on the black circle of space with its myriad suns.

A far-off thrumming, faint as with the gulfs of incomputable distance, but mechanically persistent, seemed to draw them back from the deadly depth into which they were sinking.

They opened their eyes. A long, shining bulk was poising above them in the heavens. It was the *Alcyone*! They rose toward it, they saw it veer and dip and soar again to keep pace with their ascent. It came close, it paralleled their flight with looming sides in which a man-hole had opened. Grappling-irons were thrown out, and the thing on which they rode was caught and drawn level with the ether-ship. Then, incredibly, someone had emerged from the man-hole, was standing above them, was cutting their bonds with a knife. Strong arms lifted them, and carried them through the air-lock into the warm interior of the *Alcyone*.

Half an hour later, after a course of vigorous massage to ward off possible frost-bite, and a good meal to fortify their starved and exhausted systems, they lay in their bunks and exchanged narratives with Jasper and the crew.

Jasper, it seemed, had been impelled by an intuition of evil to follow them with three of the men when they did not return to the ship within an hour after starting for that saunter among the woods of the Mercurian world.

They had traced Volmar and Roverton readily by their footprints, and had found their automatics near the animal-burrow. From there on, the trail was even plainer, with the multitude of strange tracks which gave evidence of capture by unknown beings.

Jasper and his companions had hastened on, running most of the way, and had sighted the alien space-flier in time to see the two men lifted aboard. The vessel had risen immediately afterwards and had flown slowly away in the twilight heavens, heading apparently for an orb which they identified as the second planet of the unnamed sun.

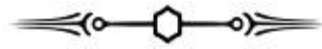
Hastening back to the *Alcyone*, they had given pursuit, and had managed to come in sight of the strange vessel once more, after many hours, as it landed in the white city at dawn. They had carefully located the huge, central spireless building on whose roof it had gone down. Then, during the short, nine-hour day of the planet, they had hung aloof in space, waiting for darkness, with the intention of descending and making some effort to find Volmar and Roverton and rescue them.

Nursing this heroic and wholly desperate plan, they had seen the mechanism on which Roverton and the Captain were bound, floating up from the city like a mote in the fiery sunset, and had flown to investigate.

“Of all the lucky breaks!” said Roverton, when the tale was finished.

“With that kind of luck,” added Volmar, “I don’t think that anything can keep us from navigating one or two more solar systems, at least.”

An Adventure in Futurity



A SURVIVOR FROM the lost continents of Mu or Atlantis, appearing on our modern streets, would have seemed no stranger, no more different from others, than the man who called himself Conrad Elkins. And yet I have always found it difficult to define, even in my own thoughts, the many elements which served to constitute this strangeness.

It would seem (since we think mainly in words and are often dependent upon them for the clarification of our ideas) that the adjectives which would fitly describe Elkins were as yet non-existent in our vocabulary; that they could be found only in some unimaginably subtle, complex and refined language, such as might be developed through long cycles of elaborating culture and civilization on an older and riper planet than ours.

Even at first sight I was greatly struck — not to say startled — by the man's personality. Perhaps the thing which arrested me more than all else was the impossibility of assigning him to any known ethnic stock. It is my theory that no human being is so individual that he does not possess obvious ear-marks which place him immediately among the tribes of mankind; and I am prone to pride myself on a sedulously cultivated gift for analyzing off-hand the nationality and racial affiliations of any given person.

But Elkins baffled me: his extreme pallor, his fine hair and clear-cut lineaments were, in a general sense, indicative of Caucasian origin; yet I could not find the distinguishing features of any American, European or Asiatic branch of the white race. Also, I could not have told his age: he

seemed young, when one considered the smoothness of his face; and yet there was a hint of something incalculably old in his expression.

His garb was modish and well-tailored, with nothing in the least unusual or eccentric. In this, as in all other things, he gave always the subtle impression of desiring to avoid notice. He was a little under medium height and of strangely delicate build; and his features, considered by themselves, were almost effeminate, apart from the great brow of uncorrugated ivory, which resembled the one that we see in the portraits of Edgar Allan Poe.

The small, intricately convoluted ears, the short, deeply curved lips, and the queer exotic molding of the sensitive nostrils all seemed to bespeak the possession of more highly developed senses than are normal to mankind. His eyes were very large and luminous, of an indescribable purplish color, and did not flinch, as I had occasion to observe, before the most intense light. His hands too were quite remarkable: in their extreme fineness, flexibility and vigor, they were the hands of a super-surgeon or a super-artist.

The man's habitual expression was wholly enigmatic. No one could have read his mind, and this not from any lack of mobility or expressiveness in the lineaments themselves, but rather, I felt sure, from the unknown character of his ideas and motivations. About him there was an aura of remote, recondite knowledge, of profound wisdom and aesthetic refinement. Assuredly he was a mystery from all angles; and any one who has gone into chemistry as I have is almost inevitably a lover of mysteries. I made up my mind to learn all that I could concerning him.

I had seen Elkins a number of times, on the streets and in libraries and museums, before the beginning of our actual acquaintance. Indeed, the frequency of our meetings in the multitudinous babel of New York was so phenomenal that I soon decided that he must have lodgings near mine and

was perhaps engaged in similar studies. I made inquiries regarding him from librarians and curators, but learned nothing more than his name and the fact that he had been reading the works of Havelock Ellis and other modern authorities on sex, as well as many books in biology, chemistry and physics.

The motives which prompted his visits to the Natural History and other museums were seemingly of a general nature. But evidently he was seeking to familiarize himself with certain branches of modern science as well as archaeology. Being myself a student of chemistry, who had given nearly a decade of collegiate and post-graduate effort to the subject, and also several years of independent work and experimentation in my laboratory on Washington Square, my curiosity was touched with fraternal interest when I learned of Elkins' studies.

Others than myself, I found, had been struck by the man's appearance; but no one really knew anything about him. He was extremely taciturn, volunteering no information whatever regarding himself, though impeccably polite in all his dealings with others. Apparently he desired to avoid making friends or acquaintances — a far-from-difficult procedure in any large city. Yet oddly enough I did not find it hard to know him — which, as I later learned, was due to the fact that Elkins had somehow conceived an interest in me and also was well aware of my interest.

I came upon him one May afternoon as he was standing in the Natural History Museum before a case of artifacts from the Mounds of the Mississippi Valley. To all appearance he was deeply absorbed. I had made up my mind to address him on some pretext or another, when suddenly he forestalled me.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he said in a grave, finely modulated voice, "how many civilizations have been irretrievably lost, how many have been

buried by deluge, glacial action and geological cataclysm, and also by profound social upheavals with their subsequent reversions to savagery?

“And do you ever think that present-day New York will some time be as fragmentary and fabulous as Troy or Zimbabwe? That archaeologists may delve in its ruins, beneath the sevenfold increment of later cities, and find a few rusting mechanisms of disputed use, and potteries of doubtful date, and inscriptions which no one can decipher?”

“I assure you, this is not only probable but certain. The very history of America, in some future epoch, will become more or less legendary; and it would surprise you to know the theories and beliefs regarding the current civilization which will some day be prevalent.”

“You speak as if you had some inside information on the subject,” I replied half-jestingly.

Elkins gave me a quick, inscrutable glance.

“I am interested in all such things,” he said. “And by the same token, Mr. Pastor, I believe you are something of a speculative thinker yourself, along different lines. I have read your little thesis on the cosmic rays. Your idea, that these rays might become a source of illimitable power through concentration, appeals to me. I can safely say that the idea is quite ultra-modern.”

I was surprised that he knew my name; but obviously he had made inquiries similar to mine. Also, of course, I was pleased by his familiarity with a treatise that was generally looked upon as being rather advanced, not to say fantastic, in its theories.

The ice being thus broken, the growth of our acquaintance was rapid. Elkins came to my rooms and laboratory many times; and I in turn was admitted to his own modest lodgings, which as I had surmised were only a few blocks away from mine on the same street.

A score of meetings, and the development of a quasi-friendship, left me as fundamentally ignorant concerning Elkins as I had been at first. I do not know why he liked me — perhaps it was the universal human need of a friend, inescapable at all times and in all places. But somehow the half-affectionate air which he soon adopted toward me did not make it any easier to ask the personal questions that seethed within me.

The more I came to know him, the more I was overcome by a sense of impossible seniority on his part — by the feeling that he must be older, and intellectually more evolved than myself, in a fashion that could not be measured by tabulated or classified knowledge. Strangely — since such a feeling has been unique in my experience — I was almost like a child before him, and grew to regard him with something of the awe which a child conceives toward an elder who is seemingly omniscient. Nor was the awe conditioned at first by anything which he actually said or did.

The furnishings of his rooms were as noncommittal as the man himself. There was nothing to seize upon as indicating his nationality and antecedents. However, I saw at once that he was a linguist, for there were books in at least four modern languages. One, which he told me he had just been reading, was a recent and voluminous German work on the physiology of sex.

“Are you really much interested in that stuff?” I ventured to ask. “There is, it seems to me, overmuch discussion and all too little knowledge regarding such matters.”

“I agree with you,” he rejoined. “One hears of special knowledge, but it fails to materialize on investigation. I thought that I had an object in studying this branch of twentieth century science; but now I doubt greatly if there is anything of value to be learned.”

I was struck by the tone of intellectual impersonality which he maintained in all our discussions, no matter what the subject. His range of information was obviously vast, and he gave the impression of boundless reserves, though there were certain avenues of science, generally looked upon as important in our day, to which he seemed to have given only a somewhat cursory and negligent attention.

I gathered that he did not think much of current medicine and surgery; and he startled me more than once by pronouncements on electricity and astronomy that were widely at variance with accepted ideas. Somehow, at most times he made me feel that he was discreetly curbing the full expression of his thoughts. He spoke of Einstein with respect and seemed to regard him as the one real thinker of the age, mentioning more than once with great approval his theories concerning time and space.

Elkins showed a tactful interest in my own chemical researches; but somehow I felt that he looked upon them as being rather elementary. Once in an unguarded manner, he spoke of the transmutation of metals as if it were already an accomplished everyday fact; explaining the reference, when I questioned him, as a rhetorical flight of imagination in which he had lost himself for the moment.

The late spring and early summer passed, and the mystery which had drawn me to Elkins was still unsolved. I did indeed learn from a casual remark that he was a native of North America — which failed to render his ethnic distinction any the less baffling. I decided that he must represent a reversion to some type whose lineaments have not been preserved in history, or must be one of those rare individuals who anticipate in themselves a whole era of the future evolution of the race. I will not deny that the truth occurred to me more than once; but how was I to know that the truth was a thing so utterly improbable?

Much as I had grown to admire and even revere him, Elkins was to me the most incomprehensible and alien being on earth; and I sensed in him a thousand differences of thought and emotion, and a world of unfamiliar knowledge which for some reason he was trying to withhold from my apprehension.

One day, toward the end of the summer, he said to me:

“I must leave New York before long, Hugh.”

I was startled, since hitherto he had made no reference to leaving or to the duration of his stay.

“You are returning home, perhaps? I hope it will at least be possible for us to keep in touch with each other.”

He gave me a long, unreadable glance.

“Yes, I am going home. But, odd as it may seem to you, there will be no possibility of future communication between us. We part for all time — unless you should care to accompany me.”

My curiosity seethed anew at his cryptic words. Yet somehow I was still unable to ask the questions that arose to my lips.

“If you mean that as an invitation,” I said, “I shall be glad to accept and pay you a visit sometime.”

“Yes, it is an invitation,” he rejoined gravely. “But before accepting, would you not prefer to know where you are going? Perhaps, when you hear the truth, you will not care to accept. And perhaps you will not even believe me.

For once, my inquisitiveness was stronger than my respect.

“Do you live on Mars or Saturn, then ?” He smiled. “No, I am a denizen of the Earth; though it may surprise you, in the present infantile condition of astronautics, to learn that I have made more than one voyage to Mars. I realize your natural curiosity concerning me; and an explanation is now

necessary. If, when you have learned the truth, you still care to accompany me as my guest, I shall be overjoyed to take you with me and to offer you my hospitality for as long as you wish to remain.”

He paused a moment. “The mystery that has troubled you will be fully explained when I tell you that I am not a man of your own era, but have come from a period far in the future — or what is known to you as the future. According to your notation, my proper time is about 15,000 A. D. My real name is Kronous Alkon — I have assumed the vaguely analogous one of Conrad Elkins, as well as the speech and garb of your time, for reasons which will be fairly obvious.

“At present I shall give you only a brief summary of the causes which prompted my visit to the twentieth century. It would require a long discourse to even offer you an adequate sketch of our social anatomy and problems; and I speak merely of one aspect.

“Humanity in our age is menaced with gradual extinction through an increasing overpreponderance of male children; and a method of sex-control, which would restore in some degree the balance of nature, is urgently desired.

“Your age, the first great mechanistic era, is a well-nigh mythical period to us, and less known even than certain earlier periods, because of the all-engulfing savagery to which man reverted at its end. There ensued long dark ages, through which only the most fragmentary records survived, along with a legendry of vast, uncouth machines which the superstition of peoples identified with avenging demons. Perhaps they were not without reason, since the abuse of machinery was one of the main causes of your débâcle.

“Also, there remained a widespread popular belief, accepted even now by many of our scientists, that the people of the twentieth century could determine at will the sex of their offspring; and that the secret of this

determination was lost in the ensuing barbarism, along with certain minor secrets of chemistry and metallurgy which no later civilization has ever re-discovered.

“The former belief has no doubt arisen because the sexes are well known to have been numerically equal in your time; and because they have not been equal since. For many thousands of years after the rebuilding of an enlightened civilization on the ruins of yours, girl-children predominated; and the whole world became a matriarchy.

“The period known as the Amazonian wars, which were the most sanguinary and merciless wars in history, put an end to the matriarchy by wiping out all but a few hundred thousand of the human race. These reverted to the most primitive conditions: there were more dark ages, and then, slowly, the evolution of our present cycle of renewed culture, in which the male predominates both numerically and intellectually. But our difficulties were not over.

“It was to recover the fabled secret of sex-determination that I came back through the ages, and have lived among you for a full year of twentieth century time. It has been a fascinating experience, and I have learned many things regarding the antique world which are altogether unknown and unverifiable to my fellows.

“Your crude, cumbrous machines and buildings are not unimpressive in their way; and your science is not without a few inklings of our later discoveries. But obviously you know even less regarding the mysterious laws of biology and sex than we do; your supposed method of determination is truly fabulous, and I have no reason for tarrying any longer in an alien epoch.

“Now to become personal. Hugh, you are the only friend I have cared to make in the epoch. Your mind is in some respects beyond the age; and

though everything will seem different to you in our time, and much will be incomprehensible, I am sure you will find a surpassing interest in the world of 15,000 A. D. I shall of course provide you with a safe means of return to your own era whenever you wish. Will you go with me, Hugh ?”

I could not reply for a moment. I was awed, astonished, bewildered even to stupefaction by the remarkable things that my friend had just told me. His statements were no less than miraculous — yet somehow they were not incredible. I did not doubt his veracity for an instant. After all, it was the only logical explanation of everything that puzzled me in Conrad Elkins.

“Of course I’ll go with you,” I cried, overcome and dazzled by the strange opportunity which he offered me.

There were a hundred obvious questions that I wanted to ask Elkins. Anticipating certain of these, he said:

“The machine in which I traveled through time is a vessel commonly used among us for space-travel. I will explain to you later the modification of the original mechanism which rendered possible a journey in that fourth-dimensional space known as time. I have reason to believe that the invention is wholly unique and has never been duplicated.

“I had nurtured for many years my project for visiting your period; and in preparation for this, I made a prolonged study of all available historic data bearing thereon, as well as the archaeological and literary remains of antique America. As I have said, the remains are fragmentary; but the language, being the root-stock of our own tongue, is fairly well-known to our scholars.

“I took pains to master it as far as possible; though I have since found that some of our pronunciations and definitions are erroneous; also, that the vocabulary is much ampler than we had supposed.

“I studied likewise the costumes of your period, of which a few plates are still extant, and made for myself habiliments which would enable me to pass unnoticed upon my arrival.”

Elkins paused, and went to his clothes-closet. He opened it and brought out a suit of some soft brown fabric. It was not badly tailored, though the cut was unfamiliar. Later, I found that the actual plate from which it had been designed belonged to the year 1940, ten years in advance of our own date.

Elkins went on. “My departure was carefully planned, and I am supposed to have gone on a voyage to the asteroids, several of which, notably Pallas, Vesta and Ceres, have been colonized by human beings for hundreds of years past.

“I made the actual time-journey in a state of unconsciousness. This, as you will soon learn, was inevitable because of the temporary abstraction from everything that creates or contributes to what we know as consciousness. I was prepared for it, and had made all the necessary calculations and adjustments beforehand, and had carefully synchronized the movement of the vessel in the time-dimension with the movement of the earth and the solar system in space. Geographically speaking, I would not move an inch during the entire trip.

“Rising to an elevation of thirty thousand feet above the earth, I started the time-mechanism. There was a period of absolute oblivion (a second or a million years would have seemed the same) and then, with the ceasing of the time-flight, I recovered my senses. Knowing that I was now in the twentieth century, if my calculations were correct, and not choosing to advertise my strangeness, I sought for a place where I could land quietly and without detection.

“The place which I selected after much circumnavigation and study was an inaccessible cliff in the Catskill Mountains, far from any settlement. There I descended at night and left my machine, whose presence was undetectable either from below or above. I finished my descent of the cliff by the use of an anti-gravitational device, and made my way from the wilderness.

“The next day I was in New York, where, for the most part, I have remained ever since and have carried on unobtrusively my studies of your civilization. For monetary needs, I had brought with me some disinterred coins of your period, and also a few small ingots of chemically wrought gold.”

He showed me one of the coins — a silver dollar that was stained almost beyond recognition, like an ancient obolus, by the oxidation of untold centuries. Then he brought out another garment from the clothes-closet — a short flaring tunic of dull red with a long graceful mantle that could be detached at will, since it was fastened to the shoulders by two clasps of carven silver. The fabric, as well as the garment itself, was strange to me. Kronous also brought out a pair of sandals, vaguely resembling those of the ancients, though they were not made of leather but of some stiff, indestructible cloth.

“This,” he said, “is the raiment in which I left Akameria, the America of 15,000 A. D. I will have a similar tunic made for you by some costume-tailor here in New York — and also sandals, though I suppose the sandals will have to be made of leather, since the material used in these is a chemical product of my own time. I am planning to leave the day after tomorrow, and I hope that will not be too soon for you.

“Indeed it won’t,” I replied. “I haven’t many preparations to make — there’s nothing to do but lock up the laboratory and phone a few friends that

I am leaving for a world-tour of indefinite length. I don't imagine there'll be any search-parties."

Two days later, with an hour of daylight still before us, Elkins and I had reached the base of the unsurmountable cliff on which the time-machine was hidden. The last four hours of our journey had been on foot. We were in the wildest section of the Catskills; and staring up at the terrible mountain-wall, I felt an increased awe of my strange companion, who seemed to have no doubt whatever of his ability to scale it.

He opened a small satchel, whose contents he had not hitherto revealed to me, and took out the anti-gravitational device of which he had spoken. The thing was a hollow disk of some dull, unidentifiable metal, with chains of an equally ambiguous material which secured it to the body. Elkins showed me the simple operation of the mechanism which, he said, was electronic in its nature. Then he strapped it to his chest, set the apparatus running, and rose slowly in air till he reached the top of the precipice. There he disappeared from view; but a few moments later, the metal disk was lowered at the end of a long cord for my use in surmounting the cliff.

Following directions, I proceeded to adjust the mechanism and start it going. The feeling of utter weightlessness as I floated upward was a most unique experience. It was as if I were a feather wafted on an imperceptible air-current. Being unused to the apparatus, I did not understand the finer technique of movement beneath its influence; and when I came to the cliff-edge I would have continued to drift skyward if my companion had not reached out and stopped me.

I found myself standing beside him on a broad ledge overhung by another cliff which rose immediately above it. Certainly Elkins could not have chosen a safer hiding-place for this time-machine.

The vessel itself, whose door he now proceeded to unlock, was a long, spindle-shaped affair, evidently designed for swift movement in air or ether. It could not have carried more than three people. Inside, it was lined with lockers and machinery, and three great slings or cradles in which the driver and passengers were immovably suspended. This of course, was requisite during the loss of gravity and normal weight in ether-flight. Elkins said that he had found it equally convenient to strap himself into one of the slings during his voyage in time.

Both of us were still dressed in twentieth century attire. Elkins now donned the tunic and sandals of his own age, which he had brought along in the satchel together with the duplicates that had been made for me by a somewhat mystified costumer. These Elkins directed me to put on. I obeyed, feeling like a masquerader in the odd garb.

“That is the last of Conrad Elkins,” said my companion, pointing to his discarded suit. “Henceforth you must call me Kronous Alkon. Your name will seem pretty outlandish among us; so I think I will introduce you as Huno Paskon, a young colonial born on Pallas.”

Kronous Alkon now busied himself with the machinery of the vessel. This, to my untrained eye, was awesomely intricate. He adjusted a series of movable rods that were set in a notched board, and seemed to be winding up a clock-like apparatus with a numbered dial and three hands. There were hundreds — perhaps thousands — of figures on the dial.

“That,” he said, “is to control within precise limits the extent of our forward movement in the time-dimension. We are all set for the proper year, month and day.”

He now fastened me, and then himself, in the complicated slings, and turned to a small key-board with many knobs and levers, which seemed to be distinct from the rest of the machinery.

“These,” he said, “are the controls for atmosphere and ether-flight. Before turning on the time-power, I shall rise to a higher altitude and fly south for about fifty miles.”

He turned one of the knobs. There was a low, drumming sound; but I would not have been conscious of any movement, if a sudden sunset glow through the vessel’s ports had not shown that we were rising above the level of the cliffs.

After a few minutes, Kronous Alkon moved one of the levers; and the drumming ceased. “The power of space-flight,” he said, “is provided by atomic disintegration. Now, for the time-flight, I shall make use of a very different kind of power — a strange, complex energy derived from the repercussion of cosmic rays, which will transport us into what, for lack of a better name, is called the fourth dimension.

“Properly speaking, we will be outside of space, and, from a mundane view-point, will be non-existent. I assure you however that there is no danger. When the time-power shuts off automatically in 15,000 A.D., you and I will awaken as if from a deep sleep. The sensation of dropping off may prove rather terrific, but no more so than the taking of certain anaesthetics. Simply let yourself go and realize that there is nothing to fear.”

He seized a large rod and gave it a powerful jerk. I felt as if I had received an electric shock that was tearing all my tissues apart and disintegrating me into my ultimate cells and molecules. In spite of the reassurance of Kronous Alkon, I was overwhelmed by an unspeakably confusing terror. I had the sensation of being divided into a million selves, all of which were whirling madly downward in the maelstrom of a darkening gulf. They seemed to go out one by one like sparks as they reached a certain level; till soon all were gone, and there was nothing anywhere but darkness and unconsciousness...

I came to myself in a manner which was like the direct reversal of my descent into oblivion. First, there was that sense of remote and spark-like entities, which increased to a multitude, all of them drifting upward in cosmic gloom from an ultimate nadir; and then the gradual merging of these entities into one, as the interior of the time-machine resumed coherent outline around me. Then I saw before me the figure of Kronous Alkon, who had twisted about in his sling, and was smiling as he met my gaze. It seemed to me that I had slept for a long, long time.

My companion pressed a knob, and I had the feeling of one who descends in an elevator. It was not necessary for Kronous Alkon to tell me that we were sinking earthward. In less than a minute, trees and buildings were visible through the ports, and there was a slight jar as we landed.

“Now,” said Kronous, “we are on my country estate near Djarma, the present capital of Akameria. Djarma is built on the ruins of the city of New York, but is hundreds of miles inland, since there have been extensive geologic changes during the past 13,000 years. You will find that the climate is different too, for it is now sub-tropical. Weather conditions are pretty much under human control, and we have even reduced by artificial means the permanent areas of ice and snow at the poles.”

He had unstrapped himself and was performing the same service for me. Then he opened the door of the vessel and motioned me to precede him. I was met by wafts of warm, perfume-laden air as I stepped out on a stone platform adjoining a sort of aerodrome — a great, shining edifice in which were housed various air-craft of unfamiliar types.

Not far away was another building, marked by a light, graceful architecture, with many tiers of open galleries, and high, fantastic, Eiffel-like towers. There were extensive gardens around this building; and broad

fields of vegetables that I did not recognize ran away on each side of the distance. Somewhat apart, there stood a group of long, one-storied houses.

“My home,” said Kronous. “I trust that everything is well. I left the estate in charge of my two cousins, Altus and Oron. Also, there is Trogh the Martian overseer, and a barracoon of Venusian slaves, who do all the agricultural labor. All our necessary menial and industrial tasks are performed by such slaves, who have been imported to earth for many generations, and are now becoming a problem in themselves. I hope there has not been any trouble during my absence.”

I noticed that Kronous had taken from an inner pocket of his tunic a small rod, vaguely resembling a flash-light and having a ball of red glass or crystal at one end. This he was carrying in his hand.

“An electronic projector,” he explained. “The current paralyzes, but does not kill, at any distance up to fifty yards. Sometimes we have to use such weapons when the slaves are recalcitrant. The Venusians are a low, vicious type and require careful handling.

We started toward the house, whose lower stories were half-concealed by tall trees and massed shrubbery. No sign of life was manifest, as we followed a winding path among fountains of colored marble, and palms and rhododendrons, and baroque, unearthly-looking plants and flowers that would have baffled a present-day botanist. Kronous told me that some of these latter were importations from Venus. The hot, humid air was saturated with odors which I found oppressive, but which Kronous appeared to inhale with delight.

Rounding a sharp turn in the path, we came to an open lawn immediately in front of the house. Here an unexpected and terrific scene revealed itself. Two men, attired like Kronous, and a huge, barrel-chested, spindle-legged being with an ugly head like that of a hydrocephalous frog, were fronting a

horde of bestial creatures who would have made the Neanderthal man look like an example of classic beauty in comparison.

There must have been a score of these beings, many of whom were armed with clubs and stones, which they were hurling at the three who opposed them. Their brown-black bodies were clothed only with patches and tufts of coarse, purple hair; and perhaps half of their number were adorned with thick, bifurcated tails. These I learned later, were the females — the males, for some obscure evolutionary reason, being undistinguished in this respect.

“The slaves!” cried Kronous, as he ran forward with his projector leveled. Following him, I saw the fall of one of the two men beneath the impact of a large stone. A dozen of the slaves were lying senseless on the lawn; and I could see that the persons they were attacking were armed with projectors.

Our approach had not been noticed; and Kronous made deadly use of his weapon at close range, stretching slave after slave on the ground. Turning, and apparently recognizing their master, the remainder began to disperse sullenly. Their rout was completed by the heavy-chested giant, who hurled after them with his catapult-like arms much of the ammunition which they had dropped on beholding Kronous.

“I fear that Altus is badly hurt,” said Kronous as we joined the little group on the lawn. The other man, whom Kronous now introduced to me as his cousin Oron, was stooping over the fallen figure and examining a hidden wound from which blood was streaming heavily amid the fine black hair. Oron, who acknowledged the introduction with a courteous nod, had himself been cut and bruised by several missiles.

The introduction had been made in English. Kronous and Oron now began to talk in a language that I could not understand. Apparently some

explanation was being made regarding myself, for Oron gave me a quick, curious glance. The giant had ceased hurling stones and clubs after the departing Venusians, and now came to join us.

“That is Trogh, the Martian overseer,” said Kronous to me. “Like all of his race he is extremely intelligent. They are an old people with an immemorial civilization that has followed a different trend from ours but is not therefore necessarily inferior; and we of earth have learned much from them, though they are highly reserved and secretive.”

The reddish-yellow body of the Martian was attired only in a black loin-cloth. His squat, toad-like features, under the high, bulging, knobby head, were impossible to read; and I was chilled by the sense of an unbridgeable evolutionary gulf as I looked into his icy green eyes.

Culture, wisdom, power, were manifest behind his gaze, but in forms that no human being was properly fitted to understand. He spoke in a harsh, guttural voice, evidently using human language, though the words were difficult to recognize as being in any way related to those employed by Kronous and Oron, because of an odd prolongation of the vowels and consonants.

Carrying among us the still unconscious form of Altus, Oron, Kronous, Trogh and myself entered the portico of the nearby house. Both the architecture and the material of this building were the most beautiful I had ever seen. Much use was made of arabesque arches and light decorative pillars. The material, which resembled a very translucent onyx, was, as Kronous told me, in reality a synthetic substance prepared by atomic transmutation.

Within, there were many couches covered with unknown opulent fabrics of superb design. The rooms were large, with lofty, vaulted ceilings; and in many cases were divided only by rows of pillars, or by tapestries. The

furniture was of much beauty, with light, curving lines that conformed to the architecture; and some of it was made from gem-like materials and gorgeous metals that I could not name. There were scores of paintings and statues, mainly of the most bizarre and fantastic nature, and testifying to supreme technical skill. I learned that some of the paintings were first-hand depictions of scenes on alien planets.

We laid Altus on a couch. The man was indeed severely injured, and his breathing was slow and faint. In all likelihood he had suffered some degree of brain-concussion.

Kronous brought out a bulb-shaped mechanism ending in a hollow cone, which, he explained to me, was the generator of a force known as osc — a super-electric energy used in the treatment of wounds as well as of illness in general. It was of sovereign power in restoring the normal processes of health, no matter what the cause of derangement might be.

When the generator was set in action by Kronous, I saw the emission of a green light from the hollow end, falling on the head of the wounded man. The pulse of Altus became stronger and he stirred a little, but did not awaken as yet. When Kronous turned off the green ray after a few minutes, he asked me to examine the wound; and I found that it was already beginning to heal.

“Altus will be perfectly well in two or three days,” said Kronous.

“The real problem,” he went on, “is the Venusians — and not only for me but for everyone else. It was a dreadful mistake to bring them to earth in the beginning; they are not only ferocious and intractable, but they breed with the most appalling fecundity, in opposition to the dwindling numbers of the human race. Already they outnumber us five to one; and in spite of our superior knowledge and weapons, I believe that they constitute our worst menace. All that they require is a little organization”

Evening had now fallen. Trogh had retired to his own quarters, presided over by his Martian wife, at some distance from the house. A meal consisting mainly of delicious fruit and vegetables, most of which were new to me, was served by Oron. I learned that one of the vegetables was a species of truffle imported from Venus. After we had eaten, a strong, delicately flavored liqueur, made from a fruit that vaguely resembled both the peach and the pineapple, was brought out in deep, slender glasses of crystal.

Kronous now spoke at some length. He told me that he had already confided the truth concerning his time-voyage and myself to Oron. "The reason I did not want my trip to be known," he said, "is because of the mechanical principle involved, which might be stolen or duplicated by some other inventor. And I am dubious of its value to mankind in general.

"We of the present era have learned not to abuse mechanical devices in the gross manner of earlier generations; but even so, it is not well that man should know too much. We have conquered space, and the conquest has entailed new perils. On the whole, I think it would be better if the conquest of time should remain an isolated exploit. I can trust Oron, and also Altus, to keep the secret."

He went on to speak of various things which he felt that it was necessary for me to know. "You will find," he soliloquized, "that our world is motivated by desires and ambitions very different from those which are most prevalent in your own. The mere struggle for existence, for wealth and power, is almost alien to our comprehension. Crime is extremely rare among us, and we have few problems of administration or government. When such occur, they are submitted to the arbitration of a board of scientists.

“We have infinite leisure; and our aspirations are toward the conquest of remote knowledge, the creation of rare art-forms, and the enjoyment of varied intellectual and aesthetic sensations, aided by the long life-span, averaging three or four hundred years, which our mastery of disease has made possible. (I myself am 150 years old, as it may surprise you to learn.)

“I am not sure, however, that this mode of life has been wholly to our advantage. Perhaps through the very lack of struggle, of hardship, of difficulty, we are becoming effete and effeminate. But I think we will be put to a severe test before long.

“Coming as you have from a commercial age,” he went on, “it will no doubt interest you to be told that half of our own commerce is interplanetary. There are whole fleets of ether-craft that ply between the earth, Mars, Venus, the moon and the asteroids. However, we are on the whole not a commercial people. Apart from those of us who have chosen to live in cities, the remainder are mostly the owners of large plantations where everything necessary is produced or manufactured by slave-labor. It is, of course, only our dwindling numbers that have made this system possible.

“We possess the power, if we so desire, of manufacturing everything through a mode of chemical synthesis. However, we find that natural food-stuffs are preferable to the synthetic kind; and we make less use of our knowledge in this regard than you might suppose. Perhaps the chief use of our mastery of atomic conversion is in the making of fabrics and building-materials.

“There is much more that I might tell you; but you will see and learn for yourself. Tomorrow morning, Oron and myself will begin to instruct you in our language.”

Thus began several quiet weeks of life on Kronous' estate. I made rapid progress in the language, which bore about the same relation to English that English bears to Latin. I was given access to a fine and extensive library filled with the latest scientific works, with fiction and poetry of the latter-day world, and also a few rare items dating from periods which, though long subsequent to our own time, were nevertheless buried in the dust of antiquity. On several occasions Kronous took me through his laboratory, in which he could perform the most incredible marvels of atomic transformation, and feats of microscopic analysis that revealed a whole world in the electron. I realized that the science of our time was child's-play compared with that of the era into which I had been transported.

One day Kronous showed me a cabinet full of objects that had been recovered from the ruins of New York and other antique cities. Among them were porcelain dinner-plates, Masonic emblems, pearl necklaces, China door-knobs, twenty dollar gold-pieces, and spark-plugs. The sight of them, and the realization of their extreme age, combined with their homely familiarity, aroused in me the most violent nostalgia — an intolerably desperate homesickness for my own period. This feeling lasted for days; and Kronous did not show me any more ancient relics.

Altus had recovered fully from his wound; and I heard of no more insubordination from the slaves of Kronous. However, I could not forget the terrible scene which had formed my initiation into life on the estate. I saw many times the savage-looking Venusians, who went about their agricultural labors with a sullen air of mindless brooding; and I was told much concerning them.

Their ancestors were inhabitants of the deep and noisomely luxuriant jungles of Venus, where they lived under the most primitive conditions, in perpetual conflict with terrible animals and insects, and also with each

other. They were cannibalistic by nature, and their habits in this respect had proven hard to curb. Every now and then on the plantation one of their number would disappear surreptitiously.

The slave-trade had flourished for several centuries, but had languished of late years, since those brought to earth had now multiplied in excess of the required quota. The original Venusian slaves were mostly, though not all, the captives of tribal raids and wars; and they had been purchased very cheaply by terrestrial traders in exchange for alcoholic liquors and edged weapons.

However, the Venusians had been willing to sell even members of their own tribes. Apparently there was little attachment or loyalty among them; and their instincts were those of wolves and tigers.

The Martians had come to earth mainly as traders; though their services were sometimes procurable for such positions as the one held by Trogh. They were taciturn and aloof; but they had permitted certain of their chemical and astronomical discoveries to be utilized by human beings.

They were a philosophical race, much given to dreaming, and were universally addicted to the use of a strange drug, known as gnultan, the juice of a Martian weed. This drug was more powerful than opium or hashish, and gave rise to even wilder visions, but its effects were physically harmless. Its use had spread among human beings, till a law was passed forbidding its importation. It was still smuggled both by Martians and Terrestrials, in spite of all the efforts made to stop it; and addiction to the drug was still fairly common among humanity.

By means of radio and television, both of which were now employed in vastly simplified and improved forms, Kronous and his cousins were in hourly touch with the whole world of their time, and even with the earth-stations on Mars, Venus, the moon and the larger asteroids. I was privileged

to see in their televisors many scenes that would have appeared like the maddest visions of delirium back in 1930.

We were posted on all the news of the world; and with my growing mastery of the language, I soon came to the point where I no longer required the interpretation of Kronous to understand the announcements. Much of this news was not reassuring, but served to confirm the prophetic fears that had been voiced by my host.

There were daily outbreaks on the part of Venusian slaves all over the planet; and in many cases much damage was inflicted before they could be subdued. Also, these outbreaks were beginning to display a mysterious concertion and a degree of mentality of which the Venusians had not hitherto been believed capable.

Acts of sabotage, as well as personal assaults, were increasingly common; and the sabotage in particular often showed a rational intelligence. Even at this early date, there were those who suspected that the Venusians were being aided and incited by the Martians; but there was no tangible proof of such abetting at the time.

One day, from Djarma, there came the news of that bizarre minerals plague known as the Black Rot. One by one the buildings in the suburbs of Djarma were being attacked by this novel disease, which caused their synthetic stone and metal to dissolve inch by inch in a fine black powder. The Rot was the work of a micro-organism which must some how have been introduced from Venus, where its ravages had been noted in certain mountain-ranges. Its appearance on earth was a mystery, but had all the air of another act of sabotage. It was capable of devouring half the elements known to chemistry; and off-hand, nothing could be discovered to arrest its progress, though all the Akameriaian chemists were at work on the problem.

Kronous and I watched in the televisor the working of the Black Rot. Somehow, it was inexpressibly terrifying to see the slowly spreading area of silent and utter devastation, the crumbled or half-eaten buildings from which the occupants had fled. The thing had started on the outskirts of Djarma, and was steadily devouring the city in an ever-broadening arc.

All the best-known scientists of Akameria were summoned in conclave at Djarma to study the Rot and devise if possible a means of retardation. Kronous, who was a renowned chemist and microscopist, was among those called upon. He offered to take me with him, and of course I accepted with the utmost eagerness.

The trip was a matter of no more than forty miles, and we made it in a light air-vessel belonging to Kronous — a sort of monoplane run by atomic power.

Though I had already familiarized myself with many of the scenes of Djarma by television, the city was a source of absorbing fascination to me. It was far smaller than New York and was widely spaced, with many gardens and exuberant semi-tropical parks meandering through its whole extent. The architecture was nearly all of the same open, aerial type that I had seen in Kronous' home. The streets were broad and spacious and there were comparatively few large buildings. The whole effect was one of supreme grace and beauty.

The streets were not overcrowded with people, and no one ever seemed to be in a hurry. It was strange to see the grotesque Martians and bestial Venusians mingling everywhere with humans of the same type as Kronous. The stature and build of Kronous were above the average and it was rare to see a man who was taller than five feet six inches. I, of course, with my five feet eleven, was very conspicuous and attracted much attention.

The conclave of savants was being held in a large edifice, built expressly for such meetings, at the heart of Djarma. Entering, we found that about two hundred men, some of whom were extremely old and venerable, had already gathered in the council chamber. Much general discussion was going on; and those who had ideas to suggest were listened to in respectful silence. Kronous and I took seats amid the gathering. So intent were all these men on the problem to be solved, that few of them even vouchsafed me a curious glance.

Peering at the faces about me, I was awed by an impression of supreme intellectuality and wisdom — the garnered lore of incalculable ages. Also, on many of these countenances I perceived the marks of a world-old ennui, and the stamp of a vague sterility, an incipient decadence.

For some time, Kronous and I listened to the discussion that was in progress. Pondering the various data brought forward, I was struck by the fact that all the elements assailed by the Black Rot belonged at the opposite end of the scale from radium in regard to their atomic activity and explosiveness.

Sotto voce, I commented on this to Kronous. “Is it not possible,” I suggested, “that radium might be of some use in combatting the plague? I believe you have told me that radium, like any other element, is easily manufacturable nowadays.”

“That is a striking inspiration,” said Kronous thoughtfully. “And it might be worth trying. With our chemical mastery we can make all the radium we need at will in our laboratories. With your permission I am going to broach the idea.”

He arose and spoke briefly amid the attentive silence of the assembly. “Credit for the idea,” he announced as he ended, “must be given to Huno

Paskon, a young colonial from Pallas, whom I have brought to earth as my guest.”

I felt myself abashed by the grave, unanimous gaze of these erudite and revered savants, who all eyed me in a manner that I could not fathom. Somehow, it seemed unthinkably presumptuous to have made any suggestion in their presence.

However, there appeared to me much serious debate going on — a widespread discussion in which the proposed use of radium was manifestly meeting with great favor. At last a venerable savant named Argo Kan, who was spokesman of the assembly, rose and said:

“I vote for an immediate trial of the method suggested by Kronous Alkon and Huno Paskon.”

Others, one by one, stood up and cast similar verbal votes, till the motion had been approved by nearly everyone present.

The meeting then dispersed, and I learned from Kronous that work was being immediately begun in local laboratories for the preparation of radium on a large scale and its utilization in the most effective form.

In less than an hour, several chemists were ready to visit the area of destruction with portable machines in which radium was disintegrated and used as a fine spray. It was magical in arresting the Black Rot which had been eating its way continuously into the city, creeping from house to house along the crumbling pavements. The whole affected area, which now covered several square miles, was soon surrounded by a cordon of men equipped with the radium-machines; and, to the vast relief of the people of Djarma and Akameria, the plague was pronounced under control.

During our stay in Djarma, Kronous and I were guests in a fine building set apart for the use of visiting scientists. I was amazed at the sybaritic luxury developed by this people — a luxury which, though illimitably and

unimaginably resourceful, was at no time in excess of the bounds of good taste.

There were baths that would have been the envy of a Roman emperor, and beds that would have reduced Cleopatra to beggary. We were lulled by rich, aerial music from no visible source, and were served with food and with all other necessities as if by intangible hands, at the mere verbal expression of a wish.

Of course, there was a mechanical secret to such wonders; but the secret was cleverly hidden, and the means never obtruded itself. Humbly I realized how far ahead of ourselves were these men of 15,000 A.D., with their quiet and consummate mastery of natural laws — a mastery which none of them seemed to regard as being of any great value or importance.

I was somewhat embarrassed by the honor paid to myself as the originator of a means of retarding the Black Rot, and could only feel that my inspiration had been merely a fortunate accident. Compliments, both written and verbal, were showered upon me by scientific dignitaries; and it was only through the intercession of Kronous, who explained my aversion to publicity, that I was able to avoid numerous invitations.

Finding that he had certain business to transact, Kronous was not ready to return to his estate for several days. Since he could not devote all of his time to me, I formed the habit of going for long walks on the streets of Djarma and through its environs.

Walking slowly amid the changing scenes of a metropolis has always been a source of unending fascination for me. And of course, in this unfamiliar city of the future, where all was new and different, the lure of such wanderings was more than doubled. And the sensations of knowing that I trod above the ruins of New York, separated from my own period by

13,000 years with their inconceivable historic and telluric vicissitudes, was about the weirdest feeling that I had ever experienced.

It was a strange spectacle through which I sauntered. Vehicles were used, of a light, noiseless, gliding type without visible means of propulsion; and there were many air-vessels which flew deftly and silently overhead and discharged their passengers on the roofs or balconies of the high buildings. And the landing or departure of great, shinning ether-ships was an hourly occurrence. However, it was the throng of foot-passengers which engaged my attention most.

Both sexes and all ages were attired in gaily colored costumes. I was impressed by the practical absence of noise, tumult and hurry; all was orderly, tranquil, unconfused. From the scarcity of women in the crowd, I realized how true were the racial fears expressed by Kronous. The women whom I saw were seldom beautiful or attractive according to 20th Century standards; in fact, there was something almost lifeless and mechanical about them, almost sexless.

It was as if the sex had long reached the limit of its evolutionary development and was now in a state of stagnation or virtual retrogression. Such, I learned from Kronous, was indeed the case. But these women, because of their rarity and their value to the race were shielded and protected with great care. Polyandry was prevalent; and romantic love, or even strong passion, were unknown things in this latter-day world.

A horrible homesickness came over me at times as I roamed amid this alien throng and peered into shop-windows where outlandish food-stuffs and curiously wrought fabrics from foreign planets were often displayed. And the feeling would increase whenever I approached the Martian quarter, where dwelt a considerable colony of these mysterious outsiders.

Some of them had transported their own many-angled and asymmetrical architecture to earth. Their houses defied the rules of geometry — one might almost say those of gravity; and the streets about them were full of exotic odors, among which the stupefying reek of the drug gnultan was predominant. The place allured me, even though it disturbed me; and I strolled often through the tortuous alleys, beyond which I would reach the open country and wander among luxuriant fields and palmy woods that were no less baffling and unfamiliar than the scenes of the City.

One afternoon I started out later than usual. As I passed through the city, I noticed that there were few Venusians in the throng and overheard rumours of fresh revolts. However, I paid little attention to these at the time.

Twilight had overtaken me when I turned back from the open country toward the Martian quarter. The sylvan wilderness, in which I had never met many people, was quieter than usual. I was following a narrow path bordered with thick shrubbery and palmettoes; and I began to hurry with a vague apprehensiveness, remembering the rumors I had heard. Heretofore I had been unafraid; but now in the thickening twilight I was aware of some indefinible menace; and I remembered that I had foolishly forgotten to arm myself with the electronic projector which Kronous had given me to carry in my wanderings.

I had not seen anyone in the neighborhood. But now, as I went along, I scrutinized the deepening shadows of the shrubbery on each side of the path. Suddenly I heard a sound behind me that was like the scuffling of heavy naked feet; and turning saw that seven or eight Venusians, several of them armed with clubs, were closing in upon me. They must have been crouching amid the leafage as I passed.

Their eyes gleamed like those of ravenous wolves in the twilight; and they uttered low, snarling, animal noises as they hurled themselves upon

me. I avoided the viciously swinging weapons of the foremost and laid him out with a neat upper-cut; but the others were at me in a moment, using indiscriminately their clubs and dirty talons. I was aware of claws that tore my clothing and slashed my flesh; and then something descended upon my head with a dull crash, and I went down through reeling flame and whirling darkness to utter insensibility.

When I came to myself I was conscious at first only of my pain-racked head and limbs. The crown of my head was throbbing violently from the blow I had received. Then I heard a mutter of thick unhuman voices, and opening my eyes, beheld the flame-lit faces and bodies of a score of Venusians who were dancing around a great fire. I was lying on my back; and it required only a tentative effort at movement to tell me that my hands and feet were bound. Another man, similarly bound and perhaps dead or dying, was stretched on the ground beside me.

I lay still, deeming it inadvisable to let the Venusians know that I had recovered consciousness, and watched the lurid scene. It was something out of Dante's *Inferno*, with the red reflection that ran bloodily on the uncouth, hairy limbs and hideous, demoniacal features of the interplanetary slaves. Their movements, though they had a semblance of some rude, horrible rhythm, were nearer to the capering of animals than they were to the dancing of even the lowest terrestrial savages; and I could not help but wonder that such beings had mastered the art of lighting a fire.

The use of fire, I was told, had been unknown to them in their own world till the advent of men. I remembered hearing also that they sometimes employed it nowadays in their cannibalistic revels, having acquired a taste for cooked meat. Likewise it was rumored of late that they were not averse to human flesh and that more than one unfortunate had fallen a victim to their practices.

Such reflections were not conducive to my peace of mind. Also, I was oddly disturbed by a large sheet of metal grating, lying near the fire and having a grotesque resemblance to a giant gridiron, which was visible at intervals between the whirling figures. At second glance I recognized it as a sort of perforated tray which was used in the dehydration of various fruits. It was about eight feet in length by four in width.

Suddenly I heard a whisper from the man beside me, whom I had supposed unconscious.

“They are waiting for the fire to die down,” he said, almost inaudibly. “Then they will broil us alive over the coals on that sheet of metal.

I shuddered, though the information was far from novel or unexpected.

“How did they get you ?” I enquired, in a tone as low as that of my interlocutor.

“I am, or was, the owner of these slaves,” he answered. “They caught me unaware this time; but I believe, or hope, that my family has escaped. I made the mistake of thinking the slaves were thoroughly cowed from punishments that I inflicted not long ago. I gather that there has been a concerted revolt this afternoon, from what the savages themselves (whose speech I understand) have let drop. They are not so unintelligent as most people believe them to be; and I have a theory that the terrestrial climate has served to stimulate their mentality.

“They possess secret means of communication among themselves over the most unbelievable distances that are no less efficient than radio. I have long suspected, too, that they have a tacit understanding with the Martians, who are covertly abetting them. The micro-organism that caused the Black Rot was no doubt smuggled from Venus by the Martians in their ether-vessels; and there is no telling what sort of plague they will loose next. There are some queer and frightful things on those alien planets — things

that are deadly to terrestrials though harmless enough to the natives. I fear that the end of human supremacy is near at hand.”

We conversed in this fashion for some time; and I learned that the name of my fellow-captive was Jos Talar. In spite of our dire and seemingly hopeless predicament, he showed no evidence of fear; and the abstract, philosophical manner in which he viewed and discussed the situation was truly remarkable. But this, as I had occasion to observe, was characteristic of the temper of mankind in that era.

A full half hour must have passed, as we lay there bound and helpless. Then we saw that the huge fire was beginning to die down, revealing a vast bed of glowing coals. The light grew dimmer on the antic figures around it and the beast-like faces of the Venusians were more loathsome than ever in the lowering gloom.

The dancing ceased, as if at an unspoken signal; and several of the dancers left the circle and came to where Jos Talar and myself were lying. We could see the gloating of their obscene eyes and the slaverling of their greedy mouths, as they dug their filthy talons into our flesh and dragged us roughly toward the fire.

In the meanwhile others had stretched the huge metal tray upon the bed of coals. All of them were eyeing us with a hyena-like avidity that made me shiver with sickness and repulsion.

I will not pretend that I was able to regard with any degree of complacency the prospect of becoming in the near future a Venusian *pièce de résistance*. But I nerved myself to the inevitable, reflecting that the agony would soon be over. Even if they did not knock us on the head beforehand, there would be a swift though terrible death on the bed of coals.

Our captors had now seized us by our feet and shoulders, as if they were about to fling us upon the improvised gridiron. There was an awful moment

of suspense; and I wondered why the Venusians did not complete the expected action. Then I heard from their lips a low snarling, with an unmistakable note of alarm, and saw that all of them were watching the starlit heavens. They must have possessed keener senses than those of humanity, for at first I could neither see nor hear anything to justify their attention. Then, far-off among the stars, I perceived a moving light such as was carried by the Akamerian air-vessels.

At first I did not connect the light with any idea of possible rescue; and I wondered at the perturbation of the slaves. Then I realized that the light was flying very low and was descending straight toward the fire. It drew near with meteoric rapidity, till Jos Talar and myself and the cowering savages were illuminated by the full beams of the bluish searchlight. The vessel itself, like all of its kind, was almost noiseless; and it slid to earth and landed with preternatural speed and dexterity, within twenty paces of the fire.

Several men emerged from its dim bulk and ran toward us. The slaves had loosened their hold on Jos Talar and myself; and growling ferociously, they crouched as if ready to leap upon the advancing figures.

The men were all armed with tubular objects, which I supposed were the usual electronic projectors. They levelled them at the Venusians; and thin rays of flame, like those from acetylene torches, issued from them and stabbed across the gloom. Several of the savages screamed with agony and fell writhing to the ground.

One of them dropped among the coals and howled for a few instants like a demon who has been taken in some pitfall prepared for the damned. The others began to run but were followed by long slender beams that searched them out in their flight, dropping several more. Soon the survivors had disappeared from view in the darkness, and the fallen had ceased to writhe.

As our rescuers approached, and the glow of the dying fire illumed their faces, I saw that the foremost was Kronous Alkon. Some of the others I recognized as scientists whom I had met in Djarma.

Kronous Alkon knelt beside me and severed my bonds with a sharp knife, while someone else performed a like service for Jos Talar.

“Are you hurt ?” asked Kronous.

“Not severely,” I replied. “But you certainly came just in the proverbial nick of time. A moment more, and they would have thrown us upon the fire. Your coming is a miracle — I cannot imagine how it happened.” “That is easily explained,” said Kronous as he helped me to my feet “When you did not return this evening, I became alarmed; and knowing the usual directions of your wanderings I studied this part of the environs of Djarma very closely with a nocturnal televisor, which renders plainly visible the details of the darkest landscape.

“I soon located the Venusians and their fire and recognized one of the bound figures as being yourself. After that, it required only a few minutes for me to collect several companions, arm them, charter an air-vessel, and seek the spot indicated by the televisor. I am more than thankful that we arrived in time.

“There has been,” he went on, “a world-wide revolt of the slave during the past few hours. Two of the continents, Asia and Australia, are already in their hands; and a desperate struggle is going on throughout Akameria. We are no longer using the electronic projectors, which merely stun. The weapons we used tonight are heat-ray generators, which kill. But come — we must return to Djarma. I will tell you more afterwards.”

Our flight to Djarma was uneventful; and Kronous and I were landed by our companions on the roof of the building in which we had been housed.

Here we said good-bye to Jos Talar, who went on with the rescuing scientists to find certain relatives and to learn if possible the fate of his family.

Kronous and I descended to our rooms, where we found Altus, who had just arrived from the estate. He told us that Oron had been killed in a terrific combat with the slaves that afternoon. Trogh had mysteriously disappeared; and Altus himself had been compelled to flee in one of the air-vessels belonging to Kronous. A truly horrible state of affairs.

My bruised head and lacerated body required attention, and Kronous gave an application of the green ray, which marvellously relieved all my pain and soreness. Altus, miraculously, had escaped injury this time in his hand-to-hand fighting with the slaves.

We sat for hours while Kronous told us the events of the day and while fresh reports continued to arrive. The world-situation had indeed become serious; and apart from the universal revolt of the slaves, many new and unlooked-for perils had disclosed themselves.

In the actual conflict the Venusians had suffered more heavily than the Terrestrials, and thousands of them had been slain and others compelled to flee before the superior weapons of mankind. But to counterbalance this, a number of new and baffling plagues had been loosed by the savages, who, it was now universally felt, were being assisted in this regard by the Martians. In the western part of Akameria great clouds of a vicious and deadly Martian insect had appeared — an insect which multiplied with the most damnable rapidity.

In other sections gases had been freed in the air that were harmless to both Venusians and Martians but deleterious to human beings. Vegetable moulds from Venus, which fed like malignant parasites on all terrene plant-forms, had also been introduced in a hundred places; and no one knew what

else the morrow would reveal in the way of extra-planetary pests and dangers. I thought of the prophecy of Jos Talar.

“At this rate,” said Kronous, “the world will soon be rendered uninhabitable for man. With our heat-rays and other weapons we might wipe out the revolutionists in time; but the plagues they have brought in are a different problem.”

There was little sleep for any of us that night. We rose at early dawn, to learn the appalling news that the whole of Europe was now subject to the interplanetary slaves. The bacteria of a score of awful Martian and Venusian diseases, to which the outsiders had developed more or less immunity, were decimating the human population, and those who survived were unable to cope with their conquerors. Similar diseases were appearing in Akameria; and all the other plagues were spreading with malign celerity.

“We must go to my estate immediately and retrieve the time machine, which I left in the aerodrome,” said Kronous to me. “You can then return to your own age — it is not fair to ask you to stay longer in a world that is nearing ultimate ruin and chaos. We, the last remnants of mankind, will fight it out as best we can; but the war is not yours.”

I protested that I had no desire to leave him; that I would remain to the end; and also that I had implicit faith in the power of humanity to overcome its extra-terrestrial foes.

Kronous smiled, a little sadly. “Nevertheless,” he persisted, “we must recover the time-machine. Thus your means of escape will be assured, no matter what happens. Will you go with me? I intend to make the trip this very forenoon.”

Of course, I could not object to this; and I was eager to accompany him. Apart from any use which I myself might make of it, the time-machine was

too rare and valuable a thing to be left at the mercy of Venusian vandals, who might well destroy it in their campaign of nation-wide sabotage.

Kronous, Altus and myself made the brief trip in the same light air-vessel that had been used for the journey to Djarma. The fertile, luxuriant countryside with fronded woods and tall, airy spires of embowered mansions above which we had flown less than a week before was now patched and blotched with devastation. Many of the houses had been gutted by fire; and the ravages of the vegetable mould from Venus had blighted many fields and forests, whose grass and foliage rotted beneath it to a nauseous grey slime.

Approaching the estate of Kronous, we saw that we should arrive none too soon. The Venusians had fired the house, and even their own quarters, and columns of smoke were arising from the doomed edifices. A dozen slaves were nearing the aerodrome with the obvious intention of trying to set it on fire, or of destroying or damaging the vessels which it contained.

The features of Kronous were deadly pale with anger. He said nothing as he steered the atomic monoplane directly toward the slaves, who had now seen us and were running headlong in a futile effort to escape. Several of them had been carrying lighted torches, which they now dropped. We swooped upon them, flying only a few feet above the ground in the open space that surrounded the aerodrome.

Two of the slaves were caught and mangled by the sharp prow of the flier; and Altus and myself, using heat-ray projectors, accounted for five more as we passed them. Only three remained; and wheeling the vessels around in a sharp curve, and steering with one hand, Kronous himself dispatched them with his heat-ray.

We landed near the entrance of the aerodrome. Kronous went in; and a minute later, the time-vessel flew gently forth and settled on the platform.

Kronous opened the door and called to me.

“You and I, Hugh, will return to Djarma in the time-ship; and Altus will take charge of the monoplane.”

No more of the Venusians were in sight; though we saw enough of their handiwork as we circled above the plantation before starting for Djarma. Kronous sighed at the ruin that had been wrought, but otherwise gave no evidence of emotion, and maintained a stoical silence.

Half an hour later we were back in our apartments at Djarma; and the time-machine was securely housed in an aerodrome nearby. Since it had all the appearance of a small interplanetary flier, no one but ourselves ever dreamt of its real nature and use.

Every hour brought fresh news of the national damage inflicted by the planetary aliens and their plagues. The Martians had now declared open hostility. Their first movement had been to destroy all the human embassies and trading-stations on Mars and to seize a vast amount of ether-shipping; but before these overt actions were generally known, they had also assumed the offensive everywhere on earth.

They possessed a frightful weapon, the zero-ray, which could penetrate animal tissue in an instant with fatal frost-bite. This weapon had been kept a secret; its invention and mode of operation were obscure to human scientists; and it was no less lethal and effective than the heat-ray. A battle was now going on in the Martian quarter of Djarma; and the Martians were holding their own.

Air-vessels had tried dropping explosives on the quarter; but this was found to be more dangerous to humanity than to the Martians; for the latter were using some sort of unknown ray which detonated the explosives in mid-air, or even while they were still on board the air-vessels.

I was forced to marvel at the equanimity shown by the people of Akameria in the face of all these dire problems and dangers. Everywhere, scientists were coolly endeavoring to combat the new pests and were seeking to devise more efficacious weapons for use against the outsiders. No fear or alarm was exhibited by anyone. Probably the secret of this calm, imperturbable attitude lay in the lofty mental evolution and philosophic detachment that had been universally attained by the human race through the past ages.

Knowing how insecure and impermanent was their tenure of existence among the inimical forces of the cosmos, men were prepared to meet their doom with resignation and dignity. Also, the race had grown old; and many, perhaps, were tired of the quotidian sameness of life and were ready to welcome anything, no matter how hazardous, in the nature of change.

Djarma was now full of refugees from the outlying plantations; and more were arriving hourly. But, gazing on the calm, unhurried throng, no one could have guessed the parlousness of the general situation. There was no evidence of strife or peril or apprehension; and even the war in the Martian quarter was conducted silently, since the weapons employed were all noiseless. Some of the Martian buildings, however had been fired by heat-rays; and a pall of black smoke was rising and mushrooming above the ruddy flames.

Djarma had suffered less, so far, than most of the other Akameriaian centers. The whole country was in disorder, and all communication was becoming seriously deranged. However, a few hours after the return of Kronous, Altus, and myself, there came from southern Akameria the warning of a new and more lethal plague than any which hitherto appeared.

A tiny venusian micro-organism, a sort of aerial algae, which spread and increased with phenomenal celerity, had been turned loose and was

rendering the air unbreathable for human beings over a vast and ever growing area. It was harmless to the Venusians themselves, for the thick, vaporous air of their native jungles was full of it; and though it was deleterious to the Martians, the latter had prepared themselves beforehand and were all equipped with respiratory masks and atmospheric alters.

But men were dying of slow asphyxiation, marked by the most painful pneumonic symptoms, wherever overtaken by the strange pest. It was visible in the air, which displayed a saffron color when invaded by the organism. For this reason, it soon became known as the Yellow Death.

Beyond the manufacture and distribution of air-masks on a large scale, nothing could be done by savants to combat the new plague. The saffron cloud was rolling northward hour by hour — a noiseless and irresistible doom; and the situation was indeed desperate. A conclave of scientists was called; and it was soon decided that humanity must evacuate the regions menaced by the deadly aerial scourge. The only resource was for men to retreat toward the Arctic circle and entrench themselves in dominions where the organism could not penetrate, since it thrived only in warm, tropical air.

“This,” said Kronous to me, sorrowfully, “is a preparatory step toward our final abandonment of the earth. The planetary aliens have conquered, as I knew they would. The cycle of human domination has completed itself; and the future belongs to the Venusians and Martians. I venture to predict, however, that the Martians will soon enslave the Venusians and rule them with a far stricter hand than we humans.”

He went on. “Hugh, the hour of our parting will soon arrive. You could leave us at any rate, as you know; but perhaps you will wish to see the drama to its end.”

I pressed his hand but could say nothing. There was a tragic pathos in the swift doom which threatened the final remnant of the race. Remote and

alien as these people were in many of their customs and ideas and feelings, they were still human. I admired their stoical courage in the face of irretrievable disaster; and for Kronous himself, after our long association and mutual vicissitudes, I had conceived a real affection.

All of Djarma was now astir with preparations for the northward flight. Every air-vessel or space-craft available was mustered for use; and more were being built with miraculous expedition. There were great air-liners and freighters in which personal belongings, food-supplies and laboratory equipment were transported; and the skies were thronged with their departure and their return for new cargoes. Perfect order and organization prevailed, and there was no trace of hurry or confusion anywhere.

Kronous, Altus and myself were among the last to leave. An immense bank of smoke was looming above the Martian quarter, and the weird, hydrocephalous inhabitants were being driven forth by the flames and were invading the deserted streets of the human section when we rose above the city in the time-vessel and steered northward. Far to the south, we could see a saffron cloud that had covered the horizon — the micro-organic plague that was smothering the whole of Akameria.

Beneath the guidance of Kronous, our vessel rose to a lofty elevation where more than the ordinary atmospheric speed was possible. Flying at seven hundred miles per hour, we soon neared the realms of perpetual winter and saw the sheeted ice of the polar regions glittering far below us.

Here humanity had already entrenched itself; and whole cities were being reared as if by magic amid the eternal wastes of snow. Laboratories and foundries were erected, where synthetic foods and fabrics and metals were prepared in immense quantities. The polar domains, however, were too inhospitable, and the climate too rigorous for a warmth-loving race, to form more than a way-station in the flight of humanity.

It was decided that the larger asteroids, which had long been successfully colonized by man, would form the most suitable cosmic refuge. A great fleet of space-vessels was soon assembled in readiness for departure; more were built amid the ice and snow; and each day was marked by the arrival of ships from mid-ether, plying among the planets, which had been warned by radio of existing terrestrial conditions and had come to assist in the universal Hegira.

In those days, before the ultimate farewell, I came to know Kronous better than at any previous time. His altruism and imperturbable fortitude aroused my deepest admiration. Of course he had cast in his lot with the people of his own era, and official posts on one of the ether-liners had already been assigned to Altus and himself. Those who displayed any interest in the matter were informed by Kronous that I, Huno Paskon, intended to return alone in a small ether-vessel to Pallas my supposedly natal asteroid. Even between ourselves, we seldom mentioned the real nature of my journey.

Kronous gave me careful instruction regarding the mechanism, both spatial and chronological, of the time-machine; but to avoid any error, he himself arranged all the controls in preparation for my flight through backward time. All that I would have to do was to turn on the power of the cosmic rays; and the machine would land me in 1930. Then after it landed, an automatic device would shoot it back to his own day.

The day of departure came, when vessels were ready for the inter-cosmic transportation of the world's remaining people. It was an awful and solemn moment. Ship by ship and fleet by fleet, from the ice-founded platforms on which they had been resting, the long bulks of glittering metal upon the Aurora Borealis and disappeared in the chill, dreadful gulfs of outer space. The ship to which Kronous had been assigned was one of the last to leave;

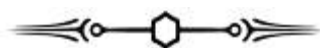
and he and I stood for a long while beside the time-vessel and watched the soaring of those skyward flocks Altus had already said a farewell to me and had gone aboard the great ether-liner.

For me, the hour was full of infinite sorrow and a strange excitement, in the realization that man was abandoning his immemorial home and would henceforward be an exile among the worlds. But the face of Kronous was a marble mask; and I could not surmise his thoughts and feelings.

At last he turned to me and smiled with an odd wistfulness. "It is time for me to go — and time for you also," he said. "Good by, Hugh — we shall not meet again. Remember me sometimes, and remember the final fate of the human race, when you are back in your own epoch."

He pressed my hand briefly and then climbed aboard the spaceliner; and he and Altus waved to me through the thick crystal of a sealed port as the huge vessel rose in air for its flight upon the interplanetary void. Sadly, regretting almost that I had not insisted upon accompanying them, I locked myself in the time-vessel and pulled the lever which would begin my own flight across the ages.

The Immeasurable Horror



I DO NOT mean to boast when I say that cowardice has never been among my failings. It would be needless to boast, in view of my honorable record as an ether-ace in six interplanetary expeditions. But I tell you that I would not return to Venus for any consideration — not for all the platinum and radium in its mountainsides, nor all the medicinal saps and pollens and vegetable ambergris of its forests. There will always be men to imperil their lives and their sanity in the Venusian trading-posts, and fools who will still try to circumnavigate a world of unearthly dangers. But I have done my share, and I know that Venus was not designed for human nerves or human brains. The loathsome multiform fecundity of its overheated jungles ought to be enough for any one — not to mention the way in which so many posts have been wholly blotted out between the departure of one space-freighter and the arrival of the next. No, Venus was not meant for man. If you still doubt me, listen to my story.

I was with the first Venusian expedition, under the leadership of Admiral Carfax, in 1977. We were able to make no more than a mere landing, and were then compelled to return earthward because of our shortage of oxygen, due to a serious miscalculation regarding our needs. It was unsafe, we found, to breathe the thick, vapor-laden air of Venus for more than short intervals; and we couldn't afford to make an overdraft on our tanks. In 1979 we went back, more fully equipped for all contingencies this time, and landed on a high plateau near the equator. This plateau, being comparatively free from the noxious flora and fauna of the abysmal steaming jungles, was to form the base of our explorations.

I felt signally honored when Admiral Carfax put me in charge of the planetary coaster whose various parts had been brought forth from the bowels of the huge ether-ship and fitted together for local use. I, Richard Harmon, was only an engineer, a third assistant pilot of the space-vessel, with no claim whatever to scientific renown; and the four men entrusted to my guidance were all experts of international fame. They were John Ashley, botanist, Aristide Rocher, geologist, Robert Manville, biologist and zoologist, and Hugo Markheim, head of the Interplanetary Survey. Carfax and the remaining sixteen of our party were to stay with the ether-ship till we returned and made our report. We were to follow the equator, landing often for close observations, and make, if feasible, a complete circuit of the planet. In our absence, a second coaster was to be fitted together, in preparation for a longitudinal voyage around the poles.

The coaster was of that type which is now commonly used for flying at all levels within the terrestrial atmosphere. It was made of neonin-tempered aluminum, it was roomy and comfortable, with ports of synthetic crystal tougher than steel, and could be hermetically closed. There were the usual engines run by explosive atomic power, and a supplementary set of the old electro-solar turbines in case of emergency. The vessel was fitted with heating and refrigerating systems, and was armed with electronic machine-guns having a forty-mile range; and we carried for hand-weapons a plentiful supply of infra-red grenades, of heat-tubes and zero tubes, not knowing what hostile forms of life we might encounter. These weapons were the deadliest ever devised by man; and a child could have wiped out whole armies with them. But I could smile now at their inadequacy...

The plateau on which we had landed was far up in a range which we named the Purple Mountains because they were covered from base to summit with enormous two-foot lichens of a rich Tyrian hue. There were

similarly covered areas in the plateau, where the soil was too thin for the sustenance of more elaborate plant-forms. Here, among the multitudinous geysers, and the horned, fantastic peaks that were intermittently visible through a steam-charged atmosphere, we had established ourselves in a lichen-field. Even here we had to wear our refrigerating suits and carry oxygen whenever we stepped out of the ether-ship; for otherwise the heat would have parboiled us in a few minutes, and the ultra-terrestrial gases in the air would have speedily overpowered us. It was a weird business, putting the coaster together under such circumstances. With our huge inflated suits and masks of green vitrolium, we must have looked like a crew of demons toiling in the fumes of Gehenna.

I shall never forget the hour when the five of us who had been chosen for that first voyage said good-bye to Admiral Carfax and the others and stepped into the coaster. Somehow, there was a greater thrill about it than that which attended the beginning of our trip through sidereal space. The 23,000 miles of our proposed circuit would of course be a mere bagatelle: but what marvels and prodigies of unimagined life we might not find! If we had only known the truth! ... but indeed it was fortunate that we could not know...

Flying very slowly, as near to the ground as was practicable, we left the plateau and descended through a long jungle-invaded pass to the equatorial plains. Sometimes, even when we almost grazed the jungle-tops, we were caught in voluminous rolling masses of cloud; and sometimes there were spaces where we could see dimly ahead for a few miles, or could even discern the white-hot glaring of the dropsical sun that hung perpetually at zenith.

We could get only a vague idea of the vegetation beneath us. It was a blurred mass of bluish and whitish greens, of etiolated mauves and saffrons

tinged with jade. But we could see that many of them had the character of calamites and giant grasses rather than trees. For a long while we sought vainly an open space in which to alight and begin our investigations.

After we had flown on for an hour or two above the serried jungle, we crossed a great river that couldn't have been so very far below the boiling-point, to judge from the columns of steam that coiled upward from it. Here we could measure the height of the jungle, for the shores were lined with titanic reeds marked off in ten yard segments, that rose for a hundred yards in air, and were overshadowed by the palm-ferns behind them. But even here there was no place for us to descend. We crossed other rivers, some of which would have made the Amazon look like a summer creek; and we must have gone on for another hour above that fuming, everlasting forest ere we came to a clear spot of land.

We wondered about that clearing, even at first sight. It was a winding mile-wide swath in the jungle, whose end and beginning were both lost in the vapors. The purplish soil seemed to have been freshly cleared, and was clean and smooth as if a whole legion of steam-rollers had gone over it. We were immensely excited, thinking that it must be the work of intelligent beings — of whom, so far, we had found no slightest trace.

I brought the coaster gently down in the clearing, close to the jungle's edge; and donning our refrigerating suits and arming ourselves with heat-tubes, we unscrewed the seven inch crystal of the manhole and emerged.

The curiosity we felt concerning that clearing was drowned in our wonder before the bordering forest. I doubt if I can give you any real idea of what it was like. The most exuberant tropic jungle on earth would have been a corn-patch in comparison. The sheer fertility of it was stupendous, terrifying, horrifying — everything was overgrown, overcrowded with a fulsome rankness that pushed and swelled and mounted even as you

watched it. Life was everywhere, seething, bursting, pullulating, rotting. I tell you, we could actually see it grow and decay, like a slow moving picture. And the variety of it was a botanist's nightmare. Ashley cursed like a longshoreman when he tried to classify some of the things we found. And Manville had his problems too, for all sorts of novel insects and animals were flopping, crawling, crashing and flying through the monstrous woods.

I'm almost afraid to describe some of those plants. The overlooming palm ferns with their poddy fronds of unwholesome mauve were bad enough. But the smaller things that grew beneath them, or sprouted from their boles and joints! Half of them were unspeakably parasitic; and many were plainly sarcophagous. There were bell-shaped flowers the size of wine barrels that dripped a paralyzing fluid on anything that passed beneath them; and the carcasses of flying lizards and strange legless mammals were rotting in a circle about each of them, with the tips of new flowers starting from the putrefaction in which they had been seeded. There were vegetable webs in which squirming things had been caught — webs that were like a tangle of green, hairy ropes. There were broad, low-lying masses of fungoid white and yellow, that yielded like a bog to suck in the unwary creatures that had trodden upon them. And there were orchids of madly grotesque types that rooted themselves only in the bodies of living animals; so that many of the fauna we saw were adorned with floral parasites.

Even though we were all armed with heat-tubes, we didn't care to go very far in those woods. New plants were shooting up all around us; and nearly everything, both animal and vegetable, seemed to have alimentary designs upon us. We had to turn our heat-tubes on the various tendrils and branches that coiled about us; and our suits were heavily dusted with the white pollen of carnivorous flowers — a pollen that was anaesthetic to the helpless monsters on which it fell. Once a veritable behemoth with a

dinosaur-like head and forelegs, loomed above us suddenly from the ferns it had trampled down, but fled with screams of deafening thunder when we leveled our heat-rays upon it until its armored hide began to sizzle. Long-legged serpents larger than anacondas were stalking about; and they were so vicious, and came in such increasing numbers, that we found it hard to discourage them. So we retreated to the coaster.

When we came again to the clearing, where the soil had been perfectly bare a few minutes before, we saw that the tips of new trees and plants were already beginning to cover it. At their rate of growth, the coaster would have been lost to sight among them in an hour or two. We had almost forgotten the enigma of that clearing; but now the problem presented itself with renewed force.

“Harmon, that swath must have been made within the last hour!” exclaimed Manville to me as we climbed back into the vessel behind the others.

“If we follow it,” I rejoined, “we’ll soon find who, or what, is making it. Are you fellows game for a little side-trip?” I had closed the manhole and was now addressing all four of my companions.

There was no demur from any one, though the following of the swath would mean a diagonal divagation from our set course. All of us were tense with excitement and curiosity. No one could venture a surmise that seemed at all credible, concerning the agency that had left a mile-wide trail. And also we were undecided as to the direction of its progress.

I set the engines running, and with that familiar roar of disintegrating carbon atoms in the cylinders beneath us, we soared to the level of the fern-tops and I steered the coaster in the direction towards which its nose happened to be pointing. However, we soon found that we were on the wrong track; for the new growth below us became disproportionately taller

and thicker, as the mighty jungle sought to refill the gap that had been cloven through its center. So I turned the coaster, and we went back in the opposite direction.

I don't believe we uttered half a dozen words among us as we followed the swath, and saw the dwindling of the plant-tops below till that bare purplish soil reappeared. We had no idea what we would find; and we were now too excited even for conjecture. I will readily admit that I, for one, felt a little nervous; the things we had already seen in the forest, together with that formidable recent clearing which no earthly machinery would have made, were enough to unsettle the equilibrium of the human system. As I have said before, I am no coward; and I have faced a variety of ultra-terrene perils without flinching. But already I began to suspect that we were among things which no earth-being was ever meant to face or even imagine. The hideous fertility of that jungle had almost sickened me. What, then, could be the agency that had cleared that jungle away more cleanly than a harvester running through a grain-field?

I watched the vapor-laden scene ahead in the reflector beside me; and the others all had their faces glued to the crystalline ports. Nothing untoward could be seen as yet; but I began to notice a slight, unaccountable increase of our speed. I had not increased the power — we had been running slowly, at no more than one hundred fifty miles per hour; and now we were gaining, as if we were borne in the sweep of some tremendous air-current or the pull of a magnetic force.

The vapors had closed in before us; now they eddied to each side, leaving the landscape visible for many miles. I think we all saw the Thing simultaneously; but no one spoke for a full thirty seconds. Then Manville muttered, very softly: "My God!"

In front, no more than a half-mile distant, the swath was filled from side to side with a moving mass of livid angleworm pink that rose above the jungle-tops. It was like a sheer cliff before us as we flew toward it. We could see that it was moving away from us, was creeping onward through the forest. The mass gave the impression of a jelly-fish consistency. It rose and fell, expanding and contracting in a slow rhythmic manner, with a noticeable deepening of color at each contraction.

“Life!” murmured Manville, “Life, in an unknown form on a scale that would not be possible in our world.”

The coaster was now rushing toward the worm-coloured mass at more than two hundred miles an hour. A moment more, and we would have plunged into that palpitating wall. I turned the wheel sharply, and we veered to the left and rose with an odd sluggishness above the jungle, where we could look down. That sluggishness worried me, after our former headlong speed. It was as if we were fighting some new gravitational force of unexpected potency.

We all had a feeling of actual nausea as we gazed down. There were leagues and leagues of that living substance; and the farther end was lost in the fuming vapors. It was moving faster than a man could run, with that horribly regular expansion and contraction, as if it were breathing. There were no visible limbs or appendages, no organs of any distinguishable kind; but we knew that the thing was alive and aware.

“Fly closer,” whispered Manville. Horror and scientific fascination contended in his voice.

I steered diagonally downward and felt an increase of the strange pull against which we were fighting. I had to reverse the gears and turn on more power to prevent the vessel from plunging headlong. We hung above the

pink mass at a hundred-yard elevation and watched it. It flowed beneath us like an unnatural river, in a flat, glistening tide.

“*Voyez!*” cried Rocher, who preferred to speak in his native tongue, though he knew English as well as any of us.

Two flying monsters, large as pterodactyls, were now circling above the mass not far below us. It seemed as if they, like the vessel, were struggling against a powerful downward attraction. Through the air-tight sound-valves we could hear the thunderous beating of their immense wings as they strove to rise and were drawn gradually toward the pink surface. As they neared it, the mass rose up in a mighty wave, and in the deep mouth-like hollow that formed at the wave’s bottom a colorless fluid began to exude and collect in a pool. Then the wave curved over, caught the struggling monsters, and lapsed again to a level, slowly palpitating surface above its prey.

We waited a little; and I realized that the onward flowing of the mass had ceased. Except for that queer throbbing, it was now entirely quiescent. But somehow there was a deadly menace in its tranquillity, as if the thing were watching or meditating. Apparently it had no eyes, no ears, no sense-organs of any sort; but I began to get the idea that in some unknowable manner, through senses beyond our apprehension, it was aware of our presence and was considering us attentively.

Now, all at once, I saw that the mass was no longer quiescent. It had begun to rise toward us, very stealthily and gradually, in a pyramidal ridge; and at the ridge’s foot, even as before, a clear, transparent pool was gathering.

The coaster wavered and threatened to fall. The magnetic pull, whatever it was, had grown stronger than ever. I turned on fresh power; we rose with a painful, dragging slowness, and the ridge below shot abruptly into a pillar that loomed beside us and toppled over toward the vessel.

Before it could reach us, Manville had seized the switch that operated one of the machine-guns, had aimed it at the pillar and released a stream of disintegrative bolts that caused the overhanging menace to vanish like a melting arm of cloud. Below us the pyramidal base of the truncated pillar writhed and shuddered convulsively, and sank back once more into a level surface. The coaster soared dizzily, as if freed from a retarding weight; and reaching what I thought would be a safe elevation, we flew along the rim of the mass in an effort to determine its extent. And as we flew, the thing began to glide along beneath us at its former rate of progress.

I don't know how many miles of it there were, winding on through the monstrous jungle like a glacier of angleworm flesh. I tell you, the thing made me feel as if my solar plexus had gone wrong. There was neither head nor tail to that damnable mass, and nothing anywhere that we could identify as special organs; it was a weltering sea of protoplasmic cells organized on a scale that staggered all preconceptions of biology. Manville was nearly out of his senses with excitement; and the rest of us were so profoundly shocked and overwhelmed that we began to wonder if the thing were real, or were merely an hallucination of nerves disordered by novel and terrific planetary forces.

Well, we came to the end of it at last, where the pink wave was eating its way through the jungle. Everything in its path was being crushed down and absorbed — the four-hundred-foot ferns, the giant grasses, the grotesque carnivorous plants and their victims, the flying, waddling, creeping and striding monsters of all types. And the thing made so little sound — there was a low murmur like that of gently moving water, and the snap or swish of trees as they went down, but nothing more.

"I guess we might as well go on," observed Manville regretfully. "I'd like to analyze a section of that stuff; but we've seen what it can do; and I

can't ask you to take any chances with the coaster."

"No," I agreed, "there's nothing to be done about it. So, if you gentlemen are all willing, we might as well resume our course."

I set the vessel back toward the equator, at a goodly speed.

"Christ! that stuff is following us!" cried Manville a minute later. He had been watching from a rear port.

Intent on steering forthrightly, it had not occurred to me to keep an eye on the thing. Now I looked into the rear reflector. The pink mass had changed its course, and was crawling along behind us, evidently at an increased rate of progression, for otherwise we would have been out of sight by now.

We all felt pretty creepy, I assure you. But it seemed ridiculous to imagine that the thing could overtake us. Even at our moderate speed, we were gaining upon it momentarily; and, if need be, we could treble our rate or soar to higher atmospheric levels. But even at that the whole business made a very disagreeable impression.

Before long we plunged into a belt of thick vapors and lost sight of our pursuer. We seemed to be traversing a sort of swamp, for we caught glimpses of titan reeds and mammoth aquatic plants amid winding stretches of voluminously steaming water. We heard the bellow of unknown leviathans, and saw the dim craning of their hideous heads on interminable necks as we passed. And once the coaster was covered with boiling spray from a marsh-geyser or volcano, and we flew blindly till we were out of it again. Then we crossed a lake of burning oil or mineral pitch, with flames that were half a mile in height; and the temperature rose uncomfortably in spite of our refrigerating system. Then there were more marshes, involved in rolling steam. And after an hour or two we emerged from the vapors, and

another zone of prodigiously luxuriant jungle began to reveal its fronded tops below us.

Flying over that jungle was like moving in a hashish eternity. There was no end to it and no change — it simply went on and on through a world without limits or horizons. And the white vaporous glare of the swollen sun, even at zenith, became a corroding torture to nerves and brain. We all felt a terrific fatigue, more from the nervous tax than anything else. Manville and Rocher went to sleep, Markheim nodded at his post, and I began to watch for a place where I could bring the coaster safely down and take a nap myself. The vessel would have kept its own course, if I had set the gears; but I didn't want to miss anything, or take any chance of collision with a high mountain-range.

Well, it seemed there was no place to land in that interminable bristling wilderness of cyclopean growths. We flew on, and I grew sleepier and sleepier. Then, through the swirling mists ahead, I saw the vague looming of low mountains. There were bare, needle-sharp peaks and long gentle scaurs of a blackish stone, almost entirely covered with red and yellow lichens taller than heather. It all looked very peaceful and desolate. I brought the coaster down on a level shelf of one of the scaurs, and fell asleep almost before the heavy thudding of the engines had died.

I don't know what it was that awakened me. But I sat up with a start, with a preternaturally distinct awareness that something was wrong. I glanced around at my companions, who were all slumbering quietly. And then I peered into the reflectors where the entire landscape about us was depicted.

I was unable to believe it for a moment — that worm-colored glacier that had crawled up the scarp beneath us, and was now hanging over the vessel like a sheer, immeasurable, flowing precipice. It had reached out in mighty

arms on either side, as if to surround us. It seemed to blot out the misty heavens as it hung there, pulsing and darkening and all a-slaver with rills of a hueless liquid from the mouths that had formed in its front. I lost a few precious seconds ere I could start the atomic engines; and as the vessel rose, the top of that loathsome cliff lengthened out and fell over like the crest of a breaking billow. It caught us with a buffeting shock, it enveloped us, we went down tossing and pitching as into a sea-trough; and our interior grew dark and blind till I switched on the lights. The vessel was now lurching nose downward, as that unbelievable wave sucked it in. My companions were awake, and I shouted half-incoherent orders to them as I turned on the full power of our cylinders and also set the electro-solar turbines going. The sides and ceiling of the coaster seemed to bend inward with the pressure as we sought to wrench ourselves free. My companions had flown to the machine-guns, they pumped them incessantly, and bolts of electronic force tore like a broadside of lightning into the mass that had engulfed us. We tried literally to blast ourselves out, with each gun revolving at the widest possible radius. I don't know how it was ever done; but at last the pressure above us began to give, there was a glimmering of light through our rear ports, and pitching dizzily, we broke loose. But even as the light returned, something dripped on my bare arms from the ceiling — a thin rill of water-clear fluid that seared like vitriol and almost laid me out with the sheer agony as it ate into my flesh. I heard someone scream and fall, and turning my head, saw Manville writhing on the floor beneath a steady drip of the same fluid. The roof and walls of the coaster were rent in several places, and some of the rifts were widening momentarily. That execrable liquid, which doubtless served as both saliva and digestive juice, had been eating the adamantine-tempered metal like acid, and we had not escaped any too soon.

The next few minutes were worse than a whole herd of nightmares. Even with our double engine-power, even with the machine-guns still tearing at the mass beside us, it was a struggle to get away, to combat the malign extra-gravitational magnetism of that hellish life-substance. And all the while, Venusian air was pouring in through the rents and our atmosphere was becoming unbreathable. Also the refrigerating system was half useless now, and we sweltered in a steaming inferno, till each of us donned his air-tight insulative suit in turn, while the others held to the guns and the steering. Manville had ceased to writhe, and we saw that he was dead. We would not have dared to look at him overlong, even if there had been time; for half his face and body were eaten away by the corroding liquid. We soared gradually, till we could look down on the horror that had so nearly devoured us. There it was, mile on mile of it stretching up the mountain-side, with the farther end somewhere in the jungle below. It seemed impossible, in view of the distance we had traversed, that the thing was the same life-mass we had met earlier in the day. But whatever it was, it must have smelt us out somehow; and seemingly it didn't mind scaling a mountain to get us. Or perhaps it was in the habit of climbing mountains. Anyway, it was hard to discourage, for our gun-fire seemed to make mere pin-holes in it that closed up again when the gunner's aim shifted. And when we started to drop grenades upon it from our hard-won elevation, it merely throbbed and heaved a little more vehemently, and darkened to a cancerous red as if it were getting angry. And when we flew off on the way we had come, toward the jungle and the swamp beyond, the damnable thing started to flow backward beneath us along the lichen-mantled slope. Evidently it was determined to have us.

I reeled in the seat with the pain of my seared arms as I held our course. We were in no condition to continue the circuit of Venus; and there was

nothing for it but a return to the Purple Mountains.

We flew at top speed, but that flowing mass of life — protoplasm, organism, or whatever it was — fairly raced us. At last we got ahead of it, where it slithered in mile-wide devastation through the jungle — but not very far ahead at that. It hung on interminably, and we all grew sick with watching it.

Suddenly we saw that the thing had ceased to follow us, and was veering off at a sharp angle.

“What do you make of that?” cried Markheim. We were all so amazed by the cessation of pursuit, that I halted the vessel and we hung in mid-air, wondering what had happened.

Then we saw. Another endless mass, of a vermin-like gray, was crawling through the jungle to meet the pink mass. The two seemed to rise up in sheer columns, like warring serpents, as they neared each other. Then they came together; and we could see that they were battling, were devouring each other, were gaining and losing alternately as they flowed back and forth in a huge area from which all vegetation was speedily blotted. At length the pink mass appeared to have won a decisive victory; it poured on and on, without cease, ingesting the other, driving it back. And we watched no longer, but resumed our flight toward the Purple Mountains.

I have no very distinct recollection of that flight: it is all a blur of incandescent vapors, of boundless, fuming forests, of blazing bitumen lakes and volcano-spouting marshes. I lived in a reeling eternity of pain, sickness, vertigo; and, toward the last, a raging delirium in which I was no longer aware of my surroundings; except by fits and starts. I don't know how I held on, how I kept course: my subliminal mind must have done it, I suppose. The others were all pretty sick, too, and could not have helped me. I seemed to be fighting an immeasurable, formless monster in that delirium;

and after a dozen eons of inconclusive combat, I came out of it long enough to see that the Purple Mountains were jutting their horns from the vapors just ahead. Dimly I steered along the jungle-taken pass and across the plateau; and the glaring heavens turned to a sea of blackness, a sea that fell and bore me down to oblivion as I landed the coaster beside the glimmering bulk of the ether-ship.

Somehow, very tortuously and vaguely, I floated out of that sea of blackness. I seemed to take hours in regaining full awareness; and the process was painful and confusing, as if my brain were unwilling to function. When I finally came to myself, I was lying in my bunk on the ether ship, and Admiral Carfax and the two doctors of the expedition were beside me, together with Markheim and Rocher. They told me I had been unconscious for fifty hours. My collapse, they thought, had been partly due to unnatural nerve-strain and shock. But my arms were both in a terrible state from the ravages of the vitriolic animal fluid that had dripped upon them. It had been necessary to amputate my left arm at the elbow; and only the most skillful care had saved the other from a like fate. My companions, though ill to the point of nausea had retained consciousness, and had told the story of our unbelievable adventures.

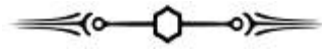
“I don’t see how you drove the coaster,” said Carfax. This, from our reticent and praise-sparing chief, was an actual brevet.

My right arm was a long time in healing — indeed, it never became quite normal again, never regained the muscular strength and nervous quickness required for aviation or space-flying. And I wasn’t so sorry, either: my nerves were badly shaken; and I was content to let others do their share, when the holes in the acid-eaten coaster had been caulked with metal melted by our heat-tubes, and another exploring party was sent out along the equator.

We waited for a hundred hours on the plateau in the Purple Mountains; but the coaster didn't return. Radio communications with it had ceased after the first nine hours. The second coaster was put together, and went out with Admiral Carfax himself in charge. Markheim and Rocher also insisted on going along. We kept in touch with the vessel till it began to approach the enormous tundras in which the sunlit hemisphere of Venus terminates, and beyond which are the frozen realms of perpetual twilight and darkness. The radio reports were full of incredible things, and I won't tell you how many of those moving life-masses were sighted, eating their way through the hideously fertile jungles or crawling out of the steam-enveloped Venusian seas that gave them birth. Nothing, however, was found of the first coaster. Then the reports ceased; and a black horror settled upon us who had remained in the ether-ship.

The huge space-vessel was ill-adapted to horizontal flight within atmospheric levels. But we set out anyway, and tried to find the coasters, though we all knew there could no longer be anything to find. I won't detail our trip: we all saw enough to turn our stomachs permanently; and those horrors of immeasurable life were sweet and charming in comparison with some of the things that our searchlights revealed on the dark side of the planet... Anyhow, we gave it up at last, and came back to earth. And I, for one, have been well satisfied to remain on Terra Firma. Others can do the exploring and work the Venusian mines and plantations. I know too well the fate of those lost parties and their vessels. And I know what has happened to the warehouses of neo-manganese steel that have utterly disappeared and have been replaced by a half-grown jungle.

The Invisible City



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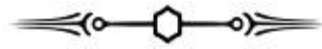
CHAPTER II. Men of the Ultra-Violet

CHAPTER III. The End of Ciis



(Illustration by Paul)

CHAPTER I.



“CONFOUND YOU,” SAID Langley in a hoarse whisper that came with effort through swollen lips, blue-black with thirst. “You’ve gulped about twice your share of the last water in the Lob-nor Desert.” He shook the canteen which Furnham had just returned to him, and listened with a savage frown to the ominously light gurgling of its contents.

The two surviving members of the Furnham Archæological Expedition eyed each other with new-born but rapidly growing disfavor. Furnham, the leader, flushed with dark anger beneath his coat of deepening dust and sunburn. The accusation was unjust, for he had merely moistened his parched tongue from Langley’s canteen. His own canteen, which he had shared equally with his companion, was now empty.

Up to that moment the two men had been the best of friends. Their months of association in a hopeless search for the ruins of the semi-fabulous city of Kobar had given them abundant reason to respect each other. Their quarrel sprang from nothing else than the mental distortion and morbidity of sheer exhaustion, and the strain of a desperate predicament. Langley, at times, was even growing a trifle light-headed after their long ordeal of wandering on foot through a land without wells, beneath a sun whose flames poured down upon them like molten lead.

“We ought to reach the Tarim river pretty soon,” said Furnham stiffly, ignoring the charge and repressing a desire to announce in mordant terms his unfavorable opinion of Langley.

“If we don’t, I guess it will be your fault,” the other snapped. “There’s been a jinx on this expedition from the beginning; and I shouldn’t wonder if

the jinx were you. It was your idea to hunt for Kobar, anyway. I've never believed there was any such place."

Furnham glowered at his companion, too near the breaking point himself to make due allowance for Langley's nerve-wrought condition, and then turned away, refusing to reply. The two plodded on, ignoring each other with sullen ostentatiousness.

The expedition, consisting of five Americans in the employ of a New York museum, had started from Khotan two months before to investigate the archæological remains of Eastern Turkestan. Ill-luck had dogged them continually; and the ruins of Kobar, their main objective, said to have been built by the ancient Uighurs, had eluded them like a mirage. They had found other ruins, had exhumed a few Greek and Byzantine coins, and a few broken Buddhas; but nothing of much novelty or importance, from a museum viewpoint.

At the very outset, soon after leaving the oasis of Tcher-tchen, one member of the party had died from gangrene caused by the vicious bite of a Bactrian camel. Later on, a second, seized by a cramp while swimming in the shallow Tarim River, near the reedy marshes of Lob-nor, that strange remnant of a vast inland sea, had drowned before his companions could reach him. A third had died of some mysterious fever. Then, in the desert south of the Tarim, where Furnham and Langley still persisted in a futile effort to locate the lost city, their Mongol guides had deserted them. They took all the camels and most of the provisions, leaving to the two men only their rifles, their canteens, their other personal belongings, the various antique relics they had amassed, and a few tins of food.

The desertion was hard to explain, for the Mongols had heretofore shown themselves reliable enough. However, they had displayed a queer

reluctance on the previous day, had seemed unwilling to venture further among the endless undulations of coiling sand and pebbly soil.

Furnham, who knew the language better than Langley, had gathered that they were afraid of something, were deterred by superstitious legends concerning this portion of the Lob-nor Desert. But they had been strangely vague and reticent as to the object of their fear; and Furnham had learned nothing of its actual nature.

Leaving everything but their food, water and rifles to the mercy of the drifting sands, the men had started northward toward the Tarim, which was sixty or seventy miles away. If they could reach it, they would find shelter in one of the sparse settlements of fishermen along its shores; and could eventually make their way back to civilization.

It was now afternoon of the second day of their wanderings. Langley had suffered most, and he staggered a little as they went on beneath the eternally cloudless heavens, across the glaring desolation of the dreary landscape. His heavy Winchester had become an insufferable burden, and he had thrown it away in spite of the remonstrance of Furnham, who still retained his own weapon.

The sun had lowered a little, but burned with gruelling rays, tyrannically torrid, through the bright inferno of stagnant air. There was no wind, except for brief and furious puffs that whirled the light sand in the faces of the men, and then died as suddenly as they had risen. The ground gave back the heat and glare of the heavens in shimmering, blinding waves of refraction.

Langley and Furnham mounted a low, gradual ridge and paused in sweltering exhaustion on its rocky spine. Before them was a broad, shallow valley, at which they stared in a sort of groggy wonderment, puzzled by the level and artificial-looking depression, perfectly square, and perhaps a third of a mile wide, which they descried in its center. The depression was bare

and empty with no sign of ruins, but was lined with numerous pits that suggested the ground-plan of a vanished city.

The men blinked, and both were prompted to rub their eyes as they peered through the flickering heat-waves; for each had received a momentary impression of flashing light, broken into myriad spires and columns, that seemed to fill the shallow basin and fade like a mirage.

Still mindful of their quarrel, but animated by the same unspoken thought, they started down the long declivity, heading straight toward the depression. If the place were the site of some ancient city they might possibly hope to find a well or water-spring.

They approached the basin's edge, and were puzzled more and more by its regularity. Certainly it was not the work of nature; and it might have been quarried yesterday, for seemingly there were no ravages of wind and weather in the sheer walls; and the floor was remarkably smooth, except for the multitude of square pits that ran in straight, intersecting lines, like the cellars of destroyed or unbuilt houses. A growing sense of strangeness and mystery troubled the two men; and they were blinded at intervals by the flash of evanescent light that seemed to overflow the basin with phantom towers and pillars.

They paused within a few feet of the edge, incredulous and bewildered. Each began to wonder if his brain had been affected by the sun. Their sensations were such as might mark the incipience of delirium. Amid the blasts of furnace-like heat, a sort of icy coolness appeared to come upon them from the broad basin. Clammy but refreshing, like the chill that might emanate from walls of sunless stone, it revived their fainting senses and quickened their awareness of unexplained mystery.

The coolness became even more noticeable when they reached the very verge of the precipice. Here, peering over, they saw that the sides fell

unbroken at all points for a depth of twenty feet or more. In the smooth bottom, the cellar-like pits yawned darkly and unfathomably. The floor about the pits was free of sand, pebbles or detritus.

“Heavens, what do you make of that?” muttered Furnham to himself rather than to Langley. He stooped over the edge, staring down with feverish and inconclusive speculations. The riddle was beyond his experience — he had met nothing like it in all his researches. His puzzlement, however, was partly submerged in the more pressing problem of how he and Langley were to descend the sheer walls. Thirst — and the hope of finding water in one of the pits — were more important at that moment than the origin and nature of the square basin.

Suddenly, in his stooping position, a kind of giddiness seized him, and the earth seemed to pitch deliriously beneath his feet. He staggered, he lost his balance, and fell forward from the verge.

Half-fainting, he closed his eyes against the hurtling descent and the crash twenty feet below. Instantly, it seemed, he struck bottom. Amazed and incomprehending, he found that he was lying at full length, prone on his stomach in mid-air, upborne by a hard, flat, invisible substance. His outflung hands encountered an obstruction, cool as ice and smooth as marble; and the chill of it smote through his clothing as he lay gazing down into the gulf. Wrenched from his grasp by the fall, his rifle hung beside him.

He heard the startled cry of Langley, and then realized that the latter had seized him by the ankles and was drawing him back to the precipice. He felt the unseen surface slide beneath him, level as a concrete pavement, glib as glass. Then Langley was helping him to his feet. Both, for the nonce, had forgotten their misunderstanding.

“Say, am I bughouse?” cried Langley. “I thought you were a goner when you fell. What have we stumbled on, anyhow?”

“Stumbled is good,” said Furnham reflectively as he tried to collect himself. “That basin is floored with something solid, but transparent as air — something unknown to geologists or chemists. God knows what it is, or where it came from or who put it there. We’ve found a mystery that puts Kobar in the shade. I move that we investigate.”

He stepped forward, very cautiously, still half-fearful of falling, and stood suspended over the basin.

“If you can do it, I guess I can,” said Langley as he followed. With Furnham in the lead, the two began to cross the basin, moving slowly and gingerly along the invisible pavement. The sensation of peering down as if through empty air was indescribably weird.

They had started midway between two rows of the dark pits, which lay fifty feet apart. Somehow, it was like following a street. After they had gone some little distance from the verge, Furnham deviated to the left, with the idea of looking directly down into one of these mysterious pits. Before he could reach a vertical vantage-point, he was arrested by a smooth, solid wall, like that of a building.

“I think we’ve discovered a city,” he announced. Groping his way along the air-clear wall, which seemed free of angles or roughness, he came to an open doorway. It was about five feet wide and of indeterminable height. Fingering the wall like a blind man, he found that it was nearly six inches thick. He and Langley entered the door, still walking on a level pavement, and advanced without obstruction, as if in a large empty room.

For an instant, as they went forward, light seemed to flash above them in great arches and arcades, touched with evanescent colors like those in fountain-spray. Then it vanished, and the sun shone down as before from a void and desert heaven. The coolness emanating from the unknown substance was more pronounced than ever; and the men almost shivered.

But they were vastly refreshed, and the torture of their thirst was somewhat mitigated.

Now they could look perpendicularly into the square pit below them in the stone floor of the excavation. They were unable to see its bottom, for it went down into shadow beyond the westerling sun-rays. But both could see the bizarre and inexplicable object which appeared to float immobile in air just below the mouth of the pit. They felt a creeping chill that was more insidious, more penetrant than the iciness of the unseen walls.

“Now I’m seeing things,” said Langley.

“Guess I’m seeing them too,” added Furnham.

The object was a long, hairless, light-grey body, lying horizontally, as if in some invisible sarcophagus or tomb. Standing erect, it would have been fully seven feet in height. It was vaguely human in its outlines, and possessed two legs and two arms; but the head was quite unearthly. The thing seemed to have a double set of high, concave ears, lined with perforations; and in place of nose, mouth and chin, there was a long, tapering trunk which lay coiled on the bosom of the monstrosity like a serpent. The eyes — or what appeared to be such — were covered by leathery, lashless and hideously wrinkled lids.

The thing lay rigid; and its whole aspect was that of a well-preserved corpse or mummy. Half in light and half in shadow, it hung amid the funereal, fathomless pit; and beneath it, at some little distance, as their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, the men seemed to perceive another and similar body.

Neither could voice the mad, eerie thoughts that assailed them. The mystery was too macabre and overwhelming and impossible. It was Langley who spoke at last.

“Say, do you suppose they are all dead?”

Before Furnham could answer, he and Langley heard a thin, shrill, exiguous sound, like the piping of some unearthly flute whose notes were almost beyond human audition. They could not determine its direction; for it seemed to come from one side and then from another as it continued. Its degree of apparent nearness or distance was also variable. It went on ceaselessly and monotonously, thrilling them with an eeriness as of untrod worlds, a terror as of uncharted dimensions. It seemed to fade away in remote ultramundane gulfs; and then, louder and clearer than before, the piping came from the air beside them.

Inexpressibly startled, the two men stared from side to side in an effort to locate the source of the sound. They could find nothing. The air was clear and still about them; and their view of the rocky slopes that rimmed the basin was blurred only by the dancing haze of heat.

The piping ceased, and was followed by a dead, uncanny silence. But Furnham and Langley had the feeling that someone or something was near them — a stealthy presence that lurked and crouched and drew closer till they could have shrieked aloud with the terror of suspense. They seemed to wait amid the unrealities of delirium and mirage, haunted by some elusive, undeclared horror.

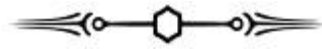
Tensely they peered and listened, but there was no sound or visual ostent. Then Langley cried out, and fell heavily to the unseen floor, borne backward by the onset of a cold and tangible thing, resistless as the launching coils of an anaconda. He lay helpless, unable to move beneath the dead and fluid weight of the unknown incubus, which crushed down his limbs and body and almost benumbed him with an icy chill as of etheric space. Then something touched his throat, very lightly at first, and then with a pressure that deepened intolerably to a stabbing pain, as if he had been pierced by an icicle.

A black faintness swept upon him, and the pain seemed to recede as if the nerves that bore it to his brain were spun like lengthening gossamers across gulfs of anesthesia.

Furnham, in a momentary paralysis, heard the cry of his companion, and saw Langley fall and struggle feebly, to lie inert with closing eyes and whitening face.

Mechanically, without realizing for some moments what had happened, he perceived that Langley's garments were oddly flattened and pressed down beneath an invisible weight. Then, from the hollow of Langley's neck, he saw the spurting of a thin rill of blood, which mounted straight in air for several inches, and vanished in a sort of red mist.

CHAPTER II. Men of the Ultra-Violet



BIZARRE, INCOHERENT THOUGHTS arose in Furnham's mind. It was all too incredible, too unreal. His brain must be wandering, it must have given way entirely... but something was attacking Langley — an invisible vampire of this invisible city.

He had retained his rifle. Now he stepped forward and stood beside the fallen man. His free hand, groping in the air, encountered a chill, clammy surface, rounded like the back of a stooping body. It numbed his finger-tips even as he touched it. Then something seemed to reach out like an arm and hurl him violently backward.

Reeling and staggering, he managed to retain his balance, and returned more cautiously. The blood still rose in a vanishing rill from Langley's throat. Estimating the position of the unseen attacker, Furnham raised his rifle and took careful aim, with the muzzle less than a yard away from its hidden mark.

The gun roared with deafening resonance, and its sound died away in slow echoes, as if repeated by a maze of walls. The blood ceased to rise from Langley's neck, and fell to a natural trickle. There was no sound, no manifestation of any kind from the thing that had assailed him. Furnham stood in doubt, wondering if his shot had taken effect. Perhaps the thing had been frightened away, perhaps it was still close at hand, and might leap upon him at any moment, or return to its prey.

He peered at Langley, who lay white and still. The blood was ceasing to flow from the tiny puncture. He stepped toward him, with the idea of trying to revive him, but was arrested by a strange circumstance. He saw that

Langley's face and upper body were blurred by a grey mist that seemed to thicken and assume palpable outlines. It darkened apace, it took on solidity and form; and Furnham beheld the monstrous thing that lay prone between himself and his companion, with part of its fallen bulk still weighing upon Langley. From its inertness, and the bullet-wound in its side, whence oozed a viscid purple fluid, he felt sure that the thing was dead.

The monster was alien to all terrestrial biology — a huge, invertebrate body, formed like an elongated starfish, with the points ending in swollen tentacular limbs. It had a round, shapeless head with the curving, needle-tipped bill of some mammoth insect. It must have come from other planets or dimensions than ours. It was wholly unlike the mummified creature that floated in the pit below, and Furnham felt that it represented an inferior animal-like type. It was evidently composed of an unknown order of organic matter that became visible to human eyes only in death.

His brain was swamped by the mad enigma of it all. What was this place upon which he and Langley had stumbled? Was it an outpost of worlds beyond human knowledge or observation? What was the material of which these buildings had been wrought? Who were their builders? Whence had they come and what had been their purpose? Was the city of recent date or was it, perhaps, a sort of ruin, whose builders lay dead in its vaults — a ruin haunted only by the vampire monster that had assailed Langley?

Shuddering with repulsion at the dead monster, he started to drag the still unconscious man from beneath its loathsome mass. He avoided touching the dark, semi-translucent body, which lapsed forward, quivering like a stiff jelly, when he had pulled his companion away from it.

Like something very trivial and far away, he remembered the absurd quarrel which Langley had picked with him, and remembered his own resentment as part of a doubtful dream, now lost in the extra-human

mystery of their surroundings. He bent over his comrade, anxiously, and saw that some of the natural tan was returning to the pale face and that the eyelids were beginning to flutter. The blood had clotted on the tiny wound. Taking Langley's canteen, he poured the last of its contents between the owner's teeth.

In a few moments Langley was able to sit up. Furnham helped him to his feet, and the two began to cross their way from the crystal maze.

They found the doorway; and Furnham, still supporting the other, decided to retrace their course along the weird street by which they had started to cross the basin. They had gone but a few paces when they heard a faint, almost inaudible rustling in the air before them, together with a mysterious grating noise. The rustling seemed to spread and multiply on every hand, as if an invisible crowd were gathering; but the grating soon ceased.

They went on, slowly and cautiously, with a sense of imminent, uncanny peril. Langley was now strong enough to walk without assistance; and Furnham held his cocked rifle ready for instant use. The vague rustling sounds receded, but still encircled them.

Midway between the underlying rows of pits, they moved on toward the desert precipice, keeping side by side. A dozen paces on the cold, solid pavement, and then they stepped into empty air and landed several feet below with a terrific jar, on another hard surface. It must have been the top of a flight of giant stairs; for, losing their balance, they both lurched and fell, and rolled downward along a series of similar surfaces, and lay stunned at the bottom.

Langley had been rendered unconscious by the fall; but Furnham was vaguely aware of several strange, dreamlike phenomena. He heard a faint, ghostly, sibilant rustling, he felt a light and clammy touch upon his face,

and smelled an odor of suffocating sweetness, in which he seemed to sink as into an unfathomable sea. The rustling died to a vast and spatial silence; oblivion darkened above him; and he slid swiftly into nothingness.

It was night when Furnham awoke. His first impression was the white dazzle of a full moon shining in his eyes. Then he became aware that the circle of the great orb was oddly distorted and broken, like a moon in some cubistic painting. All around and above him were bright, crystalline angles, crossing and intermingling — the outlines of a translucent architecture, dome on dome and wall on wall. As he moved his head, showers of ghostly irises — the lunar yellow and green and purple — fell in his eyes from the broken orb and vanished.

He saw that he was lying on a glass-like floor, which caught the light in moving sparkles. Langley, still unconscious, was beside him. Doubtless they were still in the mysterious oubliette down whose invisible stairs they had fallen. Far off, to one side, through a mélange of the transparent partitions, he could see the vague rocks of the Gobi, twisted and refracted in the same manner as the moon.

Why, he wondered, was the city now visible? Was its substance rendered perceptible, in a partial sort of way by some unknown ray which existed in moonlight but not in the direct beams of the sun? Such an explanation sounded altogether too unscientific; but he could not think of any other at the moment.

Rising on his elbow, he saw the glassy outlines of the giant stairs down which he and Langley had plunged. A pale, diaphanous form, like a phantom of the mummified creature they had seen in the pit, was descending the stairs. It moved forward with fleet strides, longer than those of a man, and stooped above Furnham with its spectral trunk waving inquisitively and poising an inch or two from his face. Two round,

phosphorescent eyes emitting perceptible beams like lanterns, glowed solemnly in its head above the beginning of the proboscis.

The eyes seemed to transfix Furnham with their unearthly gaze. He felt that the light they emitted was flowing in a ceaseless stream into his own eyes — into his very brain. The light seemed to shape itself into images, formless and incomprehensible at first, but growing clearer and more coherent momentarily. Then, in some indescribable way, the images were associated with articulate words, as if a voice were speaking: words that he understood as one might understand the language of dreams.

“We mean you no harm,” the voice seemed to say. “But you have stumbled upon our city; and we cannot afford to let you escape. We do not wish to have our presence known to men.

“We have dwelt here for many ages. The Lob-nor desert was a fertile realm when we first established our city. We came to your world as fugitives from a great planet that once formed part of the solar system — a planet composed entirely of ultra-violent substances, which was destroyed in a terrible cataclysm. Knowing the imminence of the catastrophe, some of us were able to build a huge space-flier, in which we fled to the Earth. From the materials of the flier, and other materials we had brought along for the express purpose, we built our city, whose name, as well as it can be conveyed in human phonetics, is Ciis.

“The things of your world have always been plainly visible to us; and, in fact, due to our immense scale of perceptions, we probably see much that is not manifest to you. Also, we have no need of artificial light at any time. We discovered, however, at an early date, that we ourselves and our buildings were invisible to men. Strangely enough, our bodies undergo in death a degeneration of substance which brings them within the infra-violet range; and thus within the scope of your visual cognition.”

The voice seemed to pause, and Furnham realized that it had spoken only in his thoughts by a sort of telepathy. In his own mind, he tried to shape a question:

“What do you intend to do with us?”

Again he heard the still, toneless voice:

“We plan to keep you with us permanently. After you fell through the trap-door we had opened, we overpowered you with an anesthetic; and during your period of unconsciousness, which lasted many hours, we injected into your bodies a drug which has already affected your vision, rendering visible, to a certain degree, the ultra-violet substances that surround you. Repeated injections, which must be given slowly, will make these substances no less plain and solid to you than the materials of your own world. Also, there are other processes to which we intend to subject you... processes that will serve to adjust and acclimate you in all ways to your new surroundings.”

Behind Furnham’s weird interlocutor, several more fantasmal figures had descended the half-visible steps. One of them was stooping over Langley, who had begun to stir and would recover full consciousness in a few instants. Furnham sought to frame other questions, and received an immediate reply.

“The creature that attacked your companion was a domestic animal. We were busy in our laboratories at the time, and did not know of your presence till we heard the rifle shots.

“The flashes of light which you saw among our invisible walls on your arrival were due to some queer phenomenon of refraction. At certain angles the sunlight was broken or intensified by the molecular arrangement of the unseen substance.”

At this juncture Langley sat up, looking about him in a bewildered fashion.

“What the hell is all this, and where the hell are we?” he inquired as he peered from Furnham to the people of the city.

Furnham proceeded to explain, repeating the telepathic information he had just received. By the time he had ceased speaking, Langley himself appeared to become the recipient of some sort of mental reassurance from the phantom-like creature who had been Furnham’s interlocutor; for Langley stared at this being with a mixture of enlightenment and wonder in his expression.

Once more there came the still, super-auditory voice, fraught now with imperious command.

“Come with us. Your initiation into our life is to begin immediately. My name is Aispha — if you wish to have a name for me in your thoughts. We ourselves, communicating with each other without language, have little need for names; and their use is a rare formality among us. Our generic name, as a people, is the Tiisins.”

Furnham and Langley arose with an unquestioning alacrity, for which afterwards they could hardly account, and followed Aispha. It was as if a mesmeric compulsion had been laid upon them. Furnham noted, in an automatic sort of way, as they left the oubliette, that his rifle had vanished. No doubt it had been carefully removed during his period of insensibility.

He and Langley climbed the high steps with some difficulty. Queerly enough, considering their late fall, they found themselves quite free of stiffness and bruises; but at the time they felt no surprise — only a drugged acquiescence in all the marvels and perplexities of their situation.

They found themselves on the outer pavement, amid the bewildering outlines of the luminous buildings which lowered above them with

intersections of multiform crystalline curves and angles. Aispha went on without pause, leading them toward the fantastic serpentine arch of an open doorway in one of the tallest of these edifices, whose pale domes and pinnacles were heaped in immaterial splendor athwart the zenith-nearing moon.

Four of the ultra-violet people — the companions of Aispha — brought up the rear. Aispha was apparently unarmed; but the others carried weapons like heavy-bladed and blunt-pointed sickles of glass or crystal. Many others of this incredible race, intent on their own enigmatic affairs, were passing to and fro in the open street and through the portals of the unearthly buildings. The city was a place of silent and fantasmal activity.

At the end of the street they were following, before they passed through the arched entrance, Furnham and Langley saw the rock-strewn slope of the Lob-nor, which seemed to have taken on a queer filminess and insubstantiality in the moonlight. It occurred to Furnham, with a sort of weird shock, that his visual perception of earthly objects, as well as of the ultra-violet city, was being affected by the injections of which Aispha had told him.

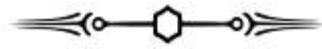
The building they now entered was full of apparatuses made in the form of distorted spheres and irregular disks and cubes, some of which seemed to change their outlines from moment to moment in a confusing manner. Certain of them appeared to concentrate the moonlight like ultra-powerful lenses, turning it to a fiery, blinding brilliance. Neither Furnham nor Langley could imagine the purpose of these devices; and no telepathic explanation was vouchsafed by Aispha or any of his companions.

As they went on into the building there was a queer sense of some importunate and subtle vibration in the air, which affected the men unpleasantly. They could not assign its source nor could they be sure

whether their own perception of it was purely mental or came through the avenues of one or more of the physical senses. Somehow it was both disturbing and narcotic; and they sought instinctively to resist its influence.

The lower story of the edifice was seemingly one vast room. The strange apparatuses grew taller about them, rising as if in concentric tiers as they went on. In the huge dome above them, living rays of mysterious light appeared to cross and re-cross at all angles of incidence, weaving a bright, ever-changing web that dazzled the eye.

CHAPTER III. The End of Ciis



THEY EMERGED IN a clear, circular space at the center of the building. Here ten or twelve of the ultra-violet people were standing about a slim column, perhaps five feet high, that culminated in a shallow basin-like formation. There was a glowing oval-shaped object in the basin, large as the egg of some extinct bird. From this object, numerous spokes of light extended horizontally in all directions, seeming to transfix the heads and bodies of those who stood in a loose ring about the column. Furnham and Langley became aware of a high, thin, humming noise which emanated from the glowing egg and was somehow inseparable from the spokes of light, as if the radiance had become audible.

Aispha paused facing the men; and a voice spoke in their minds.

“The glowing object is called the Doir. An explanation of its real nature and origin would be beyond your present comprehension. It is allied, however, to that range of substances which you would classify as minerals; and is one of a number of similar objects which existed in our former world. It generates a mighty force which is intimately connected with our life-principle; and the rays emanating from it serve us in place of food. If the Doir were lost or destroyed, the consequences would be serious; and our life-term, which normally is many thousand years, would be shortened for want of the nourishing and revivifying rays.”

Fascinated, Furnham and Langley stared at the egg-shaped orb. The humming seemed to grow louder; and the spokes of light lengthened and increased in number. The men recognized it now as the source of the vibration that had troubled and oppressed them. The effect was insidious,

heavy, hypnotic, as if there were a living brain in the object that sought to overcome their volition and subvert their senses and their minds in some unnatural thralldom.

They heard the mental command of Aispha:

“Go forward and join those who partake of the luminous emanations of the Doir. We believe that by so doing you will, in course of time, become purged of your terrestrial grossness; that the very substance of your bodies may eventually be transformed into something not unlike that of our own; and your senses raised to a perceptive power such as we possess.”

Half unwillingly, with an eerie consciousness of compulsion, the men started forward.

“I don’t like this,” said Furnham in a whisper to Langley. “I’m beginning to feel queer enough already.” Summoning his utmost will power he stopped short of the emanating rays and put out his hand to arrest Langley.

With dazzled eyes, they stood peering at the Doir. A cold, restless fire, alive with some nameless evil that was not akin to the evil of Earth, pulsed in its heart; and the long, sharp beams, quivering slightly, passed like javelins into the semi-crystalline bodies of the beings who stood immobile around the column.

“Hasten!” came the unvoiced admonition of Aispha. “In a few moments, the force in the Doir, which has a regular rhythm of ebb and flow, will begin to draw back upon itself. The rays will be retracted; and you will have to wait for many minutes before the return of the emanation.”

A quick, daring thought had occurred to Furnham. Eyeing the Doir closely, he had been impressed by its seeming fragility. The thing was evidently not attached to the basin in which it reposed; and in all likelihood it would shatter like glass if hurled or even dropped on the floor. He tried to suppress his thought, fearing that it would be read by Aispha or others of

the ultra-violet people. At the same time, he sought to phrase, as innocently as possible a mental question:

“What would happen if the Doir were broken?”

Instantly he received an impression of anger, turmoil and consternation in the mind of Aispha. His question, however, was apparently not answered; and it seemed that Aispha did not want to answer it — that he was concealing something too dangerous and dreadful to be revealed. Furnham felt, too, that Aispha was suspicious, had received an inkling of his own repressed thought.

It occurred to him that he must act quickly if at all. Nerving himself, he leaped forward through the ring of bodies about the Doir. The rays had already begun to shorten slightly; but he had the feeling of one who hurls himself upon an array of lance-points. There was an odd, indescribable sensation, as if he were being pierced by something that was both hot and cold; but neither the warmth nor the chill was beyond endurance. A moment, and he stood beside the column, lifting the glowing egg in his hands and poising it defiantly as he turned to face the ultra-violet people.

The thing was phenomenally light; and it seemed to burn his fingers and to freeze them at the same time. He felt a strange vertigo, an indescribable confusion; but he succeeded in mastering it. The contact of the Doir might be deadlier to the human tissues than that of radium for aught he knew. He would have to take his chances. At any rate it would not kill him immediately; and if he played his cards with sufficient boldness and skill, he could make possible the escape of Langley — if not his own escape.

The ring of ultra-violet beings stood as if stupefied by his audacity. The retracting spokes of light were slowly drawing back into the egg; but Furnham himself was still impaled by them. His fingers seemed to be growing translucent where they clutched the weird ball.

He met the phosphoric gaze of Aispha, and heard the frantic thoughts that were pouring into his mind, not only from Aispha but from all the partakers of the Doir's luminous beams. Dread, unhuman threats, desperate injunctions to return the Doir to its pedestal, were being laid upon him. Rallying all his will, he defied them.

"Let us go free," he said mentally addressing Aispha. "Give me back my weapon and permit my companion and me to leave your city. We wish you no harm; but we cannot allow you to detain us. Let us go — or I will shatter the Doir — will smash it like an egg on the floor."

At the shaping of his destructive thought, a shudder passed among the semi-spectral beings: and he felt the dire fear that his threat had aroused in them. He had been right: the Doir was fragile; and some awful catastrophe, whose nature he could not quite determine, would ensue instantly upon its shattering.

Step by step, glancing frequently about to see that no one approached him by stealth from behind, Furnham returned to Langley's side. The Tiisins drew back from him in evident terror. All the while he continued to issue his demands and comminations:

"Bring the rifle quickly... the weapon you took from me... and give it into my companion's hands. Let us go without hindrance or molestation — or I will drop the Doir. When we are outside the city, one of you — one only — shall be permitted to approach us, and I will deliver the Doir to him."

One of the Tiisins left the group to return in less than a minute with Furnham's Winchester. He handed it to Langley, who inspected the weapon carefully and found that it had not been damaged or its loading or mechanism tampered with in any way. Then, with the ultra-violet creatures following them in manifest perturbation, Furnham and Langley made their way from the building and started along the open street in the general

direction (as Langley estimated from the compass he carried) of the Tarim river.

They went on amid the fantastic towering of the crystalline piles; and the people of the city, called as if by some unworded summons, poured from the doorways in an ever-swelling throng and gathered behind them. There was no active demonstration of any overt kind; but both the men were increasingly aware of the rage and consternation that had been aroused by Furnham's audacious theft of the Doir — a theft that seemed to be regarded in the light of actual blasphemy.

The hatred of the Tiisins, like a material radiation — dark, sullen, stupefying, stultifying, beat upon them at every step. It seemed to clog their brains and their feet like some viscid medium of nightmare; and their progression toward the Gobi slope became painfully slow and tedious.

Before them, from one of the buildings, a tentacled, starfish monster, like the thing that had assailed Langley, emerged and lay crouching in the street as if to dispute their passage. Raising its evil beak, it glared with filmy eyes, but slunk away from their approach as if at the monition of its owners.

Furnham and Langley, passing it with involuntary shivers of repugnance, went on. The air was oppressed with alien, unformulable menace. They felt an abnormal drowsiness creeping upon them. There was an unheard, narcotic music, which sought to overcome their vigilance, to beguile them into slumber.

Furnham's fingers grew numb with the unknown radiations of the Doir, though the sharp beams of light, by accelerative degrees, had withdrawn into its center, leaving only a formless misty glow that filled the weird orb. The thing seemed latent with terrible life and power. The bones of his transparent hand were outlined against it like those of a skeleton.

Looking back, he saw that Aispha followed closely, walking in advance of the other Tiisins. He could not read the thoughts of Aispha as formerly. It was as if a blank, dark wall had been built up. Somehow he had a premonition of evil — of danger and treachery in some form which he could not understand or imagine.

He and Langley came to the end of the street, where the ultra-violet pavement joined itself to the desert acclivity. As they began their ascent of the slope both men realized that their visual powers had indeed been affected by the injective treatment of the Tiisins: for the soil seemed to glow beneath them, faintly translucent; and the boulders were like semi-crystalline masses, whose inner structure they could see dimly.

Aispha followed them on the slope; but the other people of Ciis, as had been stipulated by Furnham, paused at the juncture of their streets and buildings with the infra-violet substances of Earth.

After they had gone perhaps fifty yards on the gentle acclivity, Furnham came to a pause and waited for Aispha, holding out the Doir at arm's length. Somehow he had a feeling that it was unwise to return the mystic egg; but he would keep his promise, since the people of Ciis had kept their part of the bargain so far.

Aispha took the Doir from Furnham's hands; but his thoughts whatever they were remained carefully shrouded. There was a sense of something ominous and sinister about him as he turned and went back down the slope with the fiery egg shining through his body like a great watchful eye. The beams of light were beginning to emanate from its center once more.

The two men, looking back ever and anon, resumed their journey. Ciis glimmered below them like the city of a mirage in the moonlit hollow. They saw the ultra-violet people crowding to await Aispha at the end of their streets.

Then, as Aispha neared his fellows two rays of cold, writhing fire leaped forth from the base of a tower that glittered like glass at the city's verge. Clinging to the ground, the rays ran up the slope with the undulant motion of pythons, following Langley and Furnham at a speed that would soon overtake them.

"They're doublecrossing us!" warned Furnham. He caught the Winchester from Langley, dropped to his knees and aimed carefully, drawing a bead on the luminous orb of the Doir through the spectral form of Aispha, who had now reached the city and was about to enter the waiting throng.

"Run!" he called to Langley. "I'll make them pay for their treachery; and perhaps you can get away in the meanwhile."

He pulled the trigger, missing Aispha but dropping at least two of the Tiisins who stood near the Doir. Again, steadily, he drew bead, while the rays from the tower serpentined onward, pale, chill and deadly-looking, till they were almost at his feet. Even as he aimed, Aispha took refuge in the foremost ranks of the crowd, through whose filmy bodies the Doir still glowed.

This time the high-powered bullet found its mark, though it must have passed through more than one of the ultra-violet beings before reaching Aispha and the mystic orb.

Furnham had hardly known what the result would be, but he had felt sure that some sort of catastrophe would ensue the destruction of the Doir. What really happened was incalculable and almost beyond description.

Before the Doir could fall from the hands of its stricken bearer, it seemed to expand in a rushing wheel of intense light, revolving as it grew, and blotting out the forms of the ultra-violet people in the foreground. With awful velocity, the wheel struck the nearer buildings, which appeared to

soar and vanish like towers of fading mirage. There was no audible explosion — no sound of any kind — only that silent, ever-spinning, ever-widening disk of light that threatened to involve by swift degrees the whole extent of Ciis.

Gazing spellbound, Furnham had almost forgotten the serpentine rays. Too late he saw that one of them was upon him. He leaped back, but the thing caught him, coiling about his limbs and body like an anaconda. There was a sensation of icy cold, of horrible constriction; and then, helpless, he found that the strange beam of force was dragging him back down the slope toward Ciis, while its fellow went on in pursuit of the fleeing Langley.

In the meanwhile the spreading disk of fire had reached the tower from which the ray emanated. Suddenly, Furnham was free — the serpentine beams had both vanished. He stood rooted to the spot in speechless awe; and Langley, returning down the hill, also paused, watching the mighty circle of light that seemed to fill the entire basin at their feet with a soundless vortex of destruction.

“My God!” cried Furnham after a brief interval. “Look what’s happening to the slope.”

As if the force of the uncanny explosion were now extending beyond Ciis, boulders and masses of earth began to rise in air before the white, glowing maelstrom, and sailed in slow, silent levitation toward the men.

Furnham and Langley started to run, stumbling up the slope, and were overtaken by something that lifted them softly, buoyantly, irresistibly, with a strange feeling of utter weightlessness, and bore them like wind-wafted leaves or feathers through the air. They saw the bouldered crest of the acclivity flowing far beneath them; and then they were floating, floating, ever higher in the moonlight, above leagues of dim desert. A faintness came

upon them both — a vague nausea — an illimitable vertigo; and slowly, somewhere in that incredible flight, they lapsed into unconsciousness.

The moon had fallen low, and its rays were almost horizontal in Furnham's eyes when he awoke. An utter confusion possessed him at first; and his circumstances were more than bewildering. He was lying on a sandy slope, among scattered shrubs, meager and stunted; and Langley was reclining not far away. Raising himself a little, he saw the white and reed-fringed surface of a river — which could be none other than the Tarim — at the slope's bottom. Half incredulous, doubting his own senses, he realized that the force of the weird explosion had carried Langley and himself many miles and had deposited them, apparently unhurt, beside the goal of their desert wanderings!

Furnham rose to his feet, feeling a queer lightness and unsteadiness. He took a tentative step — and landed four or five feet away. It was as if he had lost half his normal weight. Moving with great care he went over to Langley, who had now started to sit up. He was reassured to find that his eye-sight was becoming normal again; for he perceived merely a faint glowing in the objects about him. The sand and boulders were comfortably solid; and his own hands were no longer translucent.

“Gosh!” he said to Langley. “That was some explosion. The force that was liberated by the shattering of the Doir must have done something to the gravity of all surrounding objects. I guess the city of Ciis and its people have gone back into outer space; and even the infra-violet substances about the city must have been more or less degravitated. But I guess the effect is wearing off as far as you and I are concerned — otherwise we'd be traveling still.”

Langley got up and tried to walk, with the same disconcerting result that had characterized Furnham's attempt. He mastered his limbs and his

equilibrium after a few experiments.

“I still feel like a sort of dirigible,” he commented. “Say, I think we’d better leave this out of our report to the museum. A city, a people, all invisible, in the heart of the Lob-nor — that would be too much for scientific credibility.”

“I agree with you,” said Furnham, “the whole business would be too fantastic, outside of a super-scientific story. In fact,” he added a little maliciously, “it’s even more incredible than the existence of the ruins of Kobar.”

THE END

The Dimension of Chance



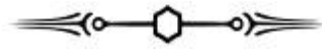
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CHAPTER I.



“BETTER GET THAT PEA-SHOOTER ready,” warned Markley through the audiphone, from his seat at the controls of the rocket plane. “At this rate we’ll come within range in a few minutes. Those Japs are good gunners, and they’ll have a red-hot welcome for us.”

Clement Morris, Secret Service operative, and college chum of Andrew Markley, his pilot, in a swift and dangerous chase, inspected the cartridge-belt of the new and incredibly rapid-firing machine gun, behind which he sat in lieu of the official gunner. Then he resumed his watching of the bright metallic speck that they followed in the thin, dark, stirless air of the stratosphere, twelve miles above the eastward-flowing blur that was Nevada.

They were beginning to overhaul the Japanese plane that had picked up the fleeing spy, Isho Sakamoto, near Ogden. Morris had been tracking down this preternaturally clever spy for months, under Government orders. Sakamoto was believed to have procured plans of many American fortifications, as well as information regarding projected army movements in the war against the Sino-Japanese Federation that had begun a year ago, in 1975.

The enemy rocket plane, descending unexpectedly from the isothermal regions, had rescued Sakamoto at the very moment when Morris was about to corner him; and Morris had immediately commandeered the services of his old friend Markley of the Air Corps, then stationed at Ogden.

Markley’s rocket plane was said to be one of the swiftest in the entire Corps. In its air-tight hull, with oxygen-tanks, helmets and parachutes already donned in case of accident, the two men were speeding onward at

an acceleration so terrific that it held them in their seats as if with leaden strait-jackets. Morris, however, was little less accustomed to such flights than Markley himself; and it was not the first time that they had hunted down some national foe or traitor in company.

They drove on between the dark-blue heavens and the dim Earth with its mottlings of mountains and desert. The roar of the rockets was strangely thin in that rarefied air. Before them the light of the stark sun, falling westward, glittered on the wings and hull of the Japanese as if on some great silver beetle. They were many miles from the usual lanes of stratosphere traffic; and no other vessels rode the windless gulf through which pursued and pursuer plunged toward the Sierras and the far Pacific.

Less than a mile now intervened betwixt the two vessels. There was no sign of overt hostility from the Japanese, which carried a heavy machine gun equal in range to that of the American ship, and was manned by a professional gunner as well as by Sakamoto and the pilot. Morris began to calculate the range carefully. It would be a fair fight; and he thrilled at the prospect. The spy, at all costs, must not be permitted to reach San Francisco, where the enemy had established a hard-won base. If the fight should go against them, he or Markley, as a last resort, would summon other planes by radio from one of the American bases in California, to intercept Sakamoto.

Far off, through the inconceivably clear air, on the enormously extended horizon, he could see the faint notching of the Californian mountains. Then, as the planes hurtled on, it seemed to him that a vague, misty blur, such as might appear in sun-dazzled eyes, had suddenly developed in mid-air beyond the Japanese. The blur baffled him, like an atmospheric blind spot, having neither form nor hue nor delimitable outlines. But it seemed to enlarge rapidly and to blot out the map-like scene beyond in an inexplicable manner.

Markley had also perceived the blur.

“That’s funny,” he roared through the audiphone. “Anything in the shape of mist or cloud would be altogether impossible at this height. Must be some queer kind of atmospheric phenomenon — the mirage of a remote cloud, perhaps, transferred to the isothermal layer. But I can’t make it out.”

Morris did not answer. Amazement checked the somewhat inconsequential remark that rose to his lips: for at that moment the Japanese rocket plane appeared to enter the mysterious blur, vanishing immediately from vision as if in actual cloud or fog. There was a quick, tremulous gleaming of its hull and wings, as if it had started to fall or had abruptly changed its course — and then it was gone, behind the hueless and shapeless veil.

“That’s funnier still,” commented Markley, in a puzzled voice. “But they can’t shake us by flying into any damned mirage or what-you-call-it. We’ll soon pick them up on the other side.”

Diving horizontally ahead at six hundred miles per hour, the vessel neared the strange blur, which had now blotted out a huge section of the sky and world. It was like a sort of blindness spreading on the upper air; but it did not convey the idea of darkness or of anything material or tangible.

Both Morris and Markley, as they neared it, felt that they were peering with strained, eluded eyes at something that was virtually beyond the scope of human vision. They seemed to grope for some ungraspable image — an unearthly shadow that fled from sight — a thing that was neither dark nor light nor colored with any known hue.

An instant more, and the blur devoured the heavens with terrible momentum. Then, as the plane rushed into it, a blindness fell on the two men, and they could no longer discern the vessel’s interior or its ports.

Ineffable greyness, like an atmosphere of cotton-wool, enveloped them and seemed to intercept all visual images.

The roar of the rockets had ceased at the same time, and they could hear nothing. Markley tried to speak, but the oath of astonishment died unuttered in his throat as if before a barrier of infrangible silence. It was as if they had entered some unfamiliar medium, neither air nor ether, that was wholly void and negative, and which refused to carry the vibrations of light, color and sound.

They had lost the sense of movement, too, and could not know if they were flying or falling or were suspended immovably in the weird vacuum. Nothing seemed able to touch or reach them; the very sense of time was gone; and their thoughts crawled sluggishly, with a dull confusion, a dreamy surprise, in the all-including void. It was like the preliminary effect of an anaesthetic: a timeless, bodiless, weightless hovering in the gulf that borders upon oblivion.

Very suddenly, like the lifting of a curtain, the blindness cleared away. In a strange, flickering, brownish-red light, the men saw the interior of the hull, and beheld each other's goggled helmets and leatheroid air-suits. They became aware that the vessel was falling gently and obliquely, with slanted floor. The rocket explosions had wholly ceased, though Markley had not touched the controlling lever. He could not start them again, and the entire mechanism refused any longer to obey his control. Through the ports, he and Morris saw a multi-colored chaos of outlandish and incomprehensible forms, into which the plane was descending slowly, with incredible lightness, like a downward-floating leaf or feather.

"I don't know what has happened, or where we are," said Markley. "But I guess we might as well sit tight. There's no need to jump — we couldn't

go down any more safely with parachutes. But what the hell have we gotten into, anyway?"

"Can't say," rejoined his companion, equally dumfounded and at a loss. "Whatever or wherever the place is, it's not the state of Nevada."

Their descent toward the unknown, mysterious terrain seemed to occupy many minutes, and once or twice the vessel hung motionless for a moment, and then resumed its gliding with a jerk. Staring from the ports in ever-growing bewilderment, they began to distinguish separate forms and masses in the queer chaos of scenery. Irregular hills, mottled with grey, green, ochre and violet-black, lifted about them in the rufous light, and they perceived that they were settling into a kind of valley-bottom. The ground beneath them was partly bare, partly covered with objects that resembled vegetable growths rather than anything else. These plants, or plant-like things, as the plane settled closer above them, displayed a remarkable diversity of shape, size and hue, ranging from leafless, limbless stems to great tree-forms with a crowded foliation that suggested some impossible crossing of araucaria and banana. The whole impression of this flora, even at that first glimpse, was one of lawless variety and illimitable grotesquery.

The vessel slanted slowly down on an open, level tract, narrowly missing the tops of some of the taller growths. It landed with a light jar, little more pronounced than if it had been checked by the usual process of careful deceleration. Markley and Morris peered out on a scene that amazed them more and more as they began to perceive its innumerable oddities of detail. For the nonce, they forgot the Japanese rocket plane they had been following, and did not even speculate regarding its fate or whereabouts.

"Jumping Christopher!" cried Markley. "Mother Nature certainly was inventive when she designed this place. Look at those plants — no two of them alike. And the soil would give a geologist the nightmare." He was now

peering at the ground about the vessel, which offered a remarkable mosaic of numberless elements — a conglomeration of parti-colored soils, ores, and mineral forms, wholly unstratified and chaotic.

It was mostly bare, and broken into uneven mounds and hummocks; but here and there, in patches of poisonous-looking clay or marl, peculiar grasses grew, with blades that varied in the same manner as the larger growths, so that one might well have imagined that each blade belonged to a separate genus.

Not far away was a clump of trees, exhibiting monstrous variations in their leafage, even when there was a vague likeness of bole or branch. It seemed as if the laws of type had been disowned; as if each individual plant were a species in itself.

A stream of some water-like fluid, varying strangely from peacock blue to cloudy amber in its course, ran past the fallen plane and meandered through the valley toward a barren slope at one end, from which another stream appeared to descend and join it, flowing in a series of rapids and low cascades from a hill-top that melted indistinctly into the reddish-brown heavens.

“Well,” observed Markley, after contemplating this milieu with a quizzical and slightly troubled frown, “the problem of how we got here is equalled in its abstruseness only by the problem of how we are going to get away. Somehow or other, we have fallen into a foreign world and are now subject to unfamiliar physical laws. Our nitron fuel simply won’t explode — there’s something — hell knows what — that prevents combustion.”

“Sure the tubes are all right?” queried Morris. “Maybe we’ve run short of fuel.”

“Huh!” the tone was superbly contemptuous. “I know this boat. There’s nothing the matter with the rocket mechanism. And I loaded up to the limit

with nitrone before we started. We could have chased Sakamoto to the Great Wall of China and back again, if necessary, without re-fueling, I tell you, we're up against something that was omitted from the text-books. Just look at this ungodly hole, anyway. It's like the scrambled hallucinations of a hundred cases of delirium tremens."

"I've monkeyed with hashish and peyote beans in my time," said Morris, "but I'll admit that I never saw anything like this. However, we're probably missing a lot by staying in the ship. What do you say to a little promenade? Sakamoto and his friends may be somewhere in the neighborhood, too; and if they are, I'd like to get a line on them."

Very cautiously, the two men unstrapped themselves from their seats and arose, in spite of their heavy garments, they felt a queer physical lightness that argued a lesser gravitation than that of Earth, and which no doubt accounted for the leisurely fall of the plane. They almost seemed to float about the hull; and found great difficulty in controlling and calculating their movements.

They had brought along a few sandwiches and a thermos bottle of coffee. These, their sole provisions, they decided to leave in the plane. Both carried automatic pistols of a new type, firing fifteen shots with terrifically high-powered ammunition, and having almost the range of rifles. Making sure that these pistols were ready in their holsters, which formed part of the leatheroid garments, and re-testing their oxygen-tanks and helmets, the men opened the sealed door of the hull by means of a spring apparatus, and emerged.

The air of the valley, as far as they could tell, was still and windless. It seemed to be quite warm, and they were forced to shut off the heating-mechanism in their suits, which they had turned on against the zero of the stratosphere. Almost vertically overhead, a heavy and lopsided sun glared

down, pouring out its light like a visible flood of reddish-brown liquid. A few clouds, with unearthly forms, floated idly about the sun; and far off in the lower heavens, above dim slopes and crags, other clouds went racing by as if driven by a mad tempest.

Trying to determine the course of their descent into the valley, Morris and Markley perceived an aerial blur at one point in the heavens — a blur similar to, and perhaps identical with, the one into which they had flown above Nevada. This blur, it occurred to Markley, was perhaps formed by the meeting or overlapping of two different kinds of space, and was the entrance between their own world and the alien dimension into which they had been precipitated. It was visible in the reddish air like the “ropiness” or cloudy nucleus that sometimes appears in a clear wine.

“Which way shall we go?” queried Markley, as he and Morris surveyed the valley on all sides, perceiving much that they had not seen from the plane. At the end that had been previously bidden, the vari-colored stream emerged from a narrowing defile of madly-tilted cliffs and pinnacles, hued as with petrified rainbows. On both sides of the valley were long, irregular slopes and barren bluffs, looming vaguely above areas of fantastic forestation. One of these areas, lying on the right hand, approached in a sort of arc to within a hundred yards of the rocket plane.

“I move that we head for the nearest timber,” said Morris, indicating this mass of grotesquely varied growths. “I have a feeling, somehow, that I’d like to get under cover as quickly as possible. There’s no telling, of course, but I have an intuition that Sakamoto and his compatriots are somewhere in the vicinity.”

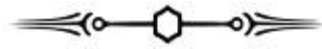
“Their visibility is pretty poor, if they are,” commented Markley. “We may have lost them altogether — maybe they got safely through that

atmospheric blind spot, or fell into another and remote section of this ungodly world.”

“Well, I’m not taking any more chances than I have to. I don’t care for the idea of a soft-nosed Japanese bullet in the back.”

“If rocket fuel won’t explode in this world, there’s no certainty that cartridges will either,” Markley pointed out. “But anyway, we might as well take a look at the woods.”

CHAPTER II. The World of Chance



THEY STARTED OFF toward the forest, trying to control the absurd lightness that sent them bounding for twenty feet or more. After a few paces, however, they found that their weight was increasing rapidly, as if they had entered a zone of stronger gravitation. They took one or two steps that were almost normal — and then floated off in ludicrous leaps of a dozen yards that were checked suddenly as if by another belt of increased gravity.

The trees, which had seemed so near, retreated in a strange and disconcerting fashion. At length, after many minutes of variable progression, the men saw the wood looming immediately before them, and could study its details. High in the heavens, above all the other growths, there towered two incredibly elongated boles such as might be seen in the delirium of hashish; and about them a medley of lesser forms, no two of which displayed the same habit, leaned and crawled and squatted or massed themselves in monstrous tangles.

There were single plants that combined enormous moon-shaped leaves with others that were fern-like or lanceolate. Gourd-like fruits grew on the same tree with others in the form of tiny plums and huge melons. Everywhere there were flowers that made the most ornate terrestrial orchids appear simple and rudimentary as daisies in comparison.

All was irregular and freakish, testifying to a haphazard law of development. It seemed that this whole chaotic cosmos in which the men found themselves had been shaped from atoms and electrons that had formed no fixed patterns of behavior, and whose one controlling law was chance. Nothing, apparently, was duplicated; the very stones and minerals

were anomalous. What further irregularities they would encounter, Morris and Markley could not guess. In a world subject to chance, everything would be incalculable; and the action of the simplest natural laws would be wholly erratic and independable. A horror of this lawless world gradually arose in them.

So far, they had met nothing in the form of animal life. Now, as they neared the forest, a creature that was like a poddy and spider-legged serpent came down as if from the heavens on one of the preposterously tall boles, running swiftly. The men stepped toward the tree, trying to decide which end of this curious creature was the head and which the tail.

Astoundingly, like a mirage, the forest faded away with their change of position; and they saw its fantastic tops at a seeming distance of many hundred yards, in an oblique direction. Turning, they found that the whole valley, during their brief journey, had shifted about and had re-composed itself beyond all recognition. They were unable to locate the rocket plane for some moments; but finally, in an opposite quarter, and seemingly much further away than they had supposed, they discerned the gleaming of its wings and hull.

Before them, in lieu of the forest, was an open space in which the varicolored stream had mysteriously re-appeared. Beyond the stream arose plots of scattered vegetation, backed by opalescent cliffs.

“The late Professor Einstein would have been interested in this,” remarked Morris. “Even the light must be moving at random, and sight images are traveling in zig-zags and circles. Nothing is where it ought to be. We’ve gotten into a labyrinth of mirages.”

“We’ll be lucky if we ever find our way back to the old boat,” snorted Markley. “Want to look any further for our Japanese friends?”

Morris did not answer at once. His eye had caught a silvery glint, close to one of the far-off plots of vegetation beyond the stream. He pointed it out to his companion silently. Three dark, moving specks, doubtless the figures of men, appeared beside the glint as they watched.

“There they are,” said Morris. “Looks as if they were starting for a pasear themselves, or were just returning from one. Shall we try to interview them?”

“You’re the captain, old scout. I’m game if you are. Lead on, MacDuff.”

Temporarily forgetting the highly illusive refraction of the weird scenery, they started toward the stream, which appeared to be only a few paces away, and which they could easily cross at a step if the light gravity prevailed in its neighborhood. By another astonishing shift, the stream moved away from them, reappearing in a different quarter, at a considerable distance; and the gleam of the Japanese rocket plane and its attendant human specks had vanished from view.

“I guess we’ll play tag with some more mirages,” opined Markley in a disgusted tone. “Even if guns will shoot in this crazy world, there’s small likelihood that we could hit anyone, or that anyone could hit us.”

More deeply bewildered and bemused than ever, they pressed forward, trying to re-locate the enemy vessel. The changing zones of gravity made their progress erratic and uncertain; and the landscape melted and shifted around them like the imagery of a kaleidoscope.

A clump of crowded vegetation, rearing its anomalous boles and monstrous leafage as if from nowhere, leaped into place before them. Rounding the clump, which seemed relatively stable, they came suddenly in sight of the Japanese, who, in air-suits and helmets, were now standing on the opposite brink of the apparently nearby water.

Whether or not Sakamoto and his fellows had seen the Americans was uncertain. They were staring in the direction of Morris and Markley, who did not wait for decisive proof that the enemy had perceived them, but drew their automatics and aimed quickly, each choosing one of the two nearest figures.

Somewhat to their surprise, in view of the various baffling and topsy-turvy phenomena they had encountered, the pressure of the triggers was followed by a sharp double report. The Japanese, however, did not seem to realize that they were being fired at; and their apparent nearness and relative position were no doubt illusory.

Markley and Morris, recognizing the probability of this, did not shoot again, but sprang forward in an effort to approach the deceptive figures. The Japanese vanished; the whole valley seemed to swirl in a semi-circle and rearrange itself; and the two Americans found themselves at the foot of that barren slope from which, in their first remote view of the place, a second stream had appeared to descend and join the meandering creek.

From their new and close vantage, however, there was only one stream, which, flowing down the valley-bottom against the barring slope, ran turbulently uphill in a series of skyward-leaping rapids and cascades!

Too astonished even for profanity, they stared without comment at this unique reversal of what they were accustomed to regard as natural law. For a considerable distance on either side of the stream, the acclivity was hollowed and worn smooth as if by landslides or a process of slow attrition. Occasionally, as the men stood watching it, a pebble, a lump of conglomerate soil, or a few particles of grit were loosened from the ground, to roll heavenward rapidly and disappear beyond the ragged crest of the slide together with the cascading waters.

Drawn by thoughtless curiosity and wonder, Morris stepped toward the beginning of the slope, which was perhaps ten feet away. It was like stepping over a precipice. The ground seemed to tilt beneath him, and the slope fell like an overturning world, till it pitched downward at a steep angle with the sky at its bottom. Unable to arrest his strange fall, he slid sidelong into the rushing water, and was carried roughly and dizzily down the rapids and over the cascades. Half-dazed and breathless, he felt that he was shooting across the world's rim toward a nether gulf in which hung the fallen sun.

Markley, seeing his companion's weird fate, also started toward the acclivity, with some dim instinctive idea of rescuing Morris from the inverted stream. A single step, and he too was seized by the skyward gravitation. Slipping, rolling and bumping as if in a steep chute, and unable to regain his foothold, he slid along the topsy-turvy slope, followed by a shower of detritus, but without falling into the water.

He and Morris, passing the rim of the slide as if hurled toward the reddish-brown sky that was now beneath them, each experienced another bewildering bouleversement. Morris found himself floundering in a sort of hilltop pool, where the final cascade foamed itself into quiescence; and Markley, stunned and sprawling but with unbroken bones, was lying on a pile of rubble such as would ordinarily gather at the bottom of an escarpment.

Morris scrambled from the pool, which was only waist-deep, and helped Markley to his feet. The local gravity was almost normal from a terrene viewpoint; and plainly all objects that were drawn skyward along the deficiently attractive area were promptly arrested when they reached the top. Headlong and turbulent, the cascade curved over the rim into the level pool.

The earth-men, finding themselves quite unhurt, proceeded to examine their air-suits and helmets for possible damage. Since the local atmosphere was untested, and might well possess deleterious properties, a rift in the leatheroid fabric would perhaps be a serious matter. The suits, however, were intact, and the tubes that supplied oxygen from flat tanks behind the shoulders were in perfect condition.

The height that they had climbed in a fashion so singular was really part of an uneven plateau that appeared to surround the whole valley. The plateau was divided by long hummocks of mottled soil and stone, which rose gradually into bleak uplands and low mountains at a seeming distance of several miles.

From their present vantage, the valley below was an immense sink. They saw the entire course of the tortuous stream, the areas of outré vegetation, and the gleaming of some metallic object which they assumed to be their own rocket plant. The Japanese plane was not visible, and was perhaps hidden by one of the plots of forestation. Of course, remembering the optical distortion and displacement which they had encountered so often in their wanderings, they could not be sure of the actual distance, perspective and relationship of the various elements in this bizarre scenery.

Turning again from the valley, they considered the plateau itself. Here the stream, running in a normal and tranquil fashion, entered a ravine and disappeared. The whole landscape was intolerably drear and repellent, with the same chaotic mineral formation as the valley, but without even the anomalous plant-life to relieve its deadly desolation.

The lopsided sun, declining very swiftly, or else subject to the nearly universal optic transposition, had already fallen half-way from its zenith toward the horizon of amorphous mountains in what the men estimated to

be less than an hour. The clouds had all melted away, but far off, above the valley, they could still discern the mysterious aerial blurred spot.

“I guess we’d better mosey back toward the boat,” said Markley, after viewing the barren scene with obvious horror. “But we won’t try to go the way we came. If we follow the rim of the valley, we ought to find a place where the gravitation won’t drag us the wrong way.”

Made doubly cautious by their disconcerting experiences, they started along the verge of the sink. For some distance, the ground was littered with detritus, and even with loose boulders that had rolled upward to be arrested at the top. When they came to the end of this rubble, they surmised that they were beyond the belt of reverse gravitation.

Following the rim toward a point where the slope became easier and more gradual, they came suddenly into a zone of heavier gravity than any they had yet entered. At one step their weight appeared to treble; a crushing burden descended upon them; and they could lift their feet only with immense effort.

Struggling against the uncanny pull of the strange earth, and on the verge of panic they heard an indescribable clattering and rustling behind them, and turned their heads laboriously, in much startlement, to ascertain the cause.

Emerging as if from empty air, a concourse of unimaginably monstrous beings had gathered at their very heels on the bleak verge of the plateau. There were scores or hundreds of these entities, who, whether mere beasts or the analogues of humanity, were no less various and freakish in their conformation than the weird flora of the valley-bottom.

Obviously, there was no common norm or type of development as in terrestrial species. Some of the entities were no less than twelve or thirteen feet tall; others were squat pygmies. Limbs, bodies and sense-organs were

equally diversified. One creature was like a prodigious moonfish mounted on stilts. Another was a legless, rolling globe fringed about the equator with prehensile ropes that served to haul it along by attaching themselves to projections. Still another resembled a wingless bird with a great falcon beak and a tapering serpentine body with lizard legs, that glided half-erect. Some of the creatures possessed double or triple bodies; some were hydra-headed, or equipped with an excessive number of limbs, eyes, mouths, ears and other anatomical features.

Truly these beings were the spawn of chance, the random creations of a lawless biologic force. A horde of fabulous, fantastic, nightmare improbabilities, they surged forward upon Morris and Markley, uttering a babel of wordless sounds, of cacklings, hisses, clucks, ululations, roarings and bellowings. Whether they were hostile or merely curious, the men could not decide. Both were petrified with a horror beyond the horror of evil dreams.

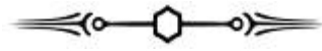
The leaden gravitational drag, rendering the least movement slow and toilsome, re-enforced their sensation of nightmare. Laboriously they drew their pistols, and half-lifting them at the oncoming rout, pulled the triggers. The reports were dull and muffled; the bullets flew with visible slowness, and rebounded harmlessly like tossed pebbles from the monsters that they struck.

Like a stampeding herd, the throng of biologic horrors was upon Morris and Markley. Battling against the gravity as well as against the loathsome bodies and members that engulfed them, they were borne irresistibly along by the seething mass. Their pistols were torn from their hands, they saw hideous faces and faceless things that milled about them like a torrent of the damned in some nether circle. Occasionally, in broken glimpses, they saw a disordered landscape of amorphous rocks, with pools and streams of fine

sand, and sudden, fortuitous vegetation like mad mirages, through which they were being carried.

The origin of the monsters, their purpose, their destination, their intentions in regard to the earth-men, were enigmatic as the riddles of delirium. Resistance was futile; and Morris and Markley gave themselves up to the rushing motion of the throng, in the hope that some opportunity of escape would ultimately offer itself.

CHAPTER III. The Masters of Chance



THEY SEEMED TO GO on for hours. The gravitation still varied, but was often constant over large areas. The sun, instead of sinking further, rose again to the zenith. Sometimes there were brief intervals of darkness, as if the light had been shut off by some queer fluctuation of atmospheric properties. Puffs of wild wind arose and died. Rocks and whole hummocks seemed to crumble abruptly on the waste. But through all this chaos of conditions, the monstrous horde poured onward with its captives.

Apparently the earth-men had fallen in with a whole tribe of these anomalous creatures, who were perhaps migrating from one zone of their random world to another. At least, such was the explanation that suggested itself in lieu of positive knowledge.

Markley and Morris became aware that the ground was slanting downward. Over the heads of the monsters, they saw that they had entered a flat, sloping valley. Rough mountains, perhaps the same that they had beheld from the rim of the sink, appeared to loom at no great distance above them.

The low valley debouched in a sort of shallow, crater-like hollow. Here the horde suddenly arrested its onward rush and began to spread out in a curious manner. Markley and Morris, now able to work their way forward, saw that the creatures had arranged themselves in a ring about the slopes of the circular hollow, leaving a clear space at its bottom.

In the center of the vacant space, a singular phenomenon was manifesting itself. A fountain of fine, hueless powder rose from the stone and soil, attaining a height of three feet. Slowly it widened and rose higher, preserving the form of a round column. Its top mushroomed into a vague

cloud, spreading above the heads of the assembled throng and floating skyward. It was as if some process of molecular dissolution were taking place, to form this fountain.

Markley and Morris were fascinated by the spectacle. Before them, the silent, circular crumbling of the ground went on, the column swelled to Titanic proportions, towering above the crater. Seemingly, too, the monsters were fascinated, for none of them stirred to break the ring-like formation.

Then, gradually, as the column of atoms increased, the horde began to surge forward. The ring narrowed till its inmost ranks were driven, close-packed, into the fountain by the pressure from behind. Visibly, as the creatures entered it, their limbs and bodies melted like bursting puff-balls, to swell the columnar cloud of dissolution that mounted skyward.

“Are they all going to commit suicide and take us with them?” Markley’s voice was a horror-tautened whisper. He and Morris, caught in the forward ranks, were being forced slowly toward the fountain. Only two rows of the monsters now intervened; and even as Markley spoke, the bodies of the inmost row began to dissolve in the column.

The earth-men struggled desperately against the massed bodies that crowded from behind. But the living wall, close and implacable, as if bent on nothing but self-immolation, drove them downward inch by inch.

Overhead, the sun was blinded by the mushrooming column. The sky took on a madder-brown twilight. Then, with a suddenness as of some atmospheric legerdemain, the twilight blackened into Cimmerian darkness. A mad, elemental howling tore the air, a blind hurricane filled the crater, blowing as if from above; and bolts of lightning leapt upward from the ground, enshrouding with blue and violet fire the horrible horde of biologic anomalies.

The pressure behind the earth-men relaxed. A panic seemed to have seized the monsters, who were now dispersing in the bolt-riven darkness. The earth-men, fighting their way upward, stumbled over the half-charred bodies of those who had been slain by the lightning. By intermittent flashes, they saw, looking back, that the column of atomic dissolution still poured from the crater's bottom, to merge with the seething storm that had risen as if at random from nowhere.

Miraculously untouched by the lightning, Morris and Markley found themselves in the flat valley through which they had entered the crater. Most of the monsters had now disappeared, melting away like the shadows of a nightmare; and the last flashes revealed little but vacant soil and rock.

The lightning ceased, leaving the men in darkness. An irresistible wind, like a torrent of rushing water, bore them along through the Stygian night, and they lost all trace of each other henceforth. Often hurled headlong, or lifted bodily from the ground at the mercy of lawless, anarchic elements, they were blown apart like lost leaves.

Abruptly as it had begun, the tumult fell in a great stillness. The darkness dissolved from the heavens. Morris, lying dazed and breathless, found himself alone amid barren reaches of rock and sand. He could trace nothing familiar in the landscape. The mountains were lost to view, and he saw no sign of the fountain of molecules. It was as if he had been transported to another tract of this fantastic realm of chance.

Halloing loudly, but answered only by sardonic echoes, he started off at random in an effort to find Markley. Once or twice, amid the shifting, illusive imageries through which he wandered, he thought that he saw the mountains that had loomed beyond the crater of dissolution.

The sun, changing its apparent position by leaps and bounds, was now close to the horizon, and its rays were indescribably dark and eerie. Morris,

plodding doggedly on amid the delusive advances and recessions of the dreary landscape, came without warning to a flat valley that was somehow familiar. Before him the lost mountains re-appeared as if by magic; and going on, he emerged in the crater-like hollow.

Many of the charred monsters, slain by the electric storm, were strewn about the slopes. But the fountain itself was no longer active. A round, funnel-like pit, twenty feet in diameter, yawned dark and silent at the bottom of the hollow.

Morris felt the descent of an overmastering despair. Lost as he was in this awful trans-dimensional limbo, and separated from his comrade, whose fate he could not imagine, the prospect was indeed drear and hopeless. His whole body ached with accumulated fatigue; his mouth and throat were afire with corrosive thirst. Though the oxygen still poured freely from its tank, he could not tell how much of the supply remained. A few hours, at most, and then his ordeals might end in asphyxiation. Momentarily crushed by the horror of it all, he sat down on the crater slope in the rusty-brown gloom.

Curiously, the twilight did not darken. As if in a reversed ecliptic, the sun returned slowly into the heavens. But Morris, in his despair, hardly heeded this outré phenomenon.

Staring dully at the re-illuminated ground, he saw the appearance of several grotesque, anomalous shadows that fell past him on the slope. Startled from his lethargy, he sprang up. A dozen or more of the monstrous people had returned. Some of them were gnawing the cindery bodies of their late companions; but three, as if disdaining such fare, were closing in upon Morris.

Even as he turned, they assailed him. One of them, a headless thing with ropy arms and a puckered, mouth-like orifice in the center of its gourd-

shaped body, tried to drag him down with its frightfully elongated members. Another, which might have been some heraldic griffin minus wings and feathers, began to peck at his air-suit with its tremendous horny beak. The third, which was more like a horribly overgrown toad than anything else, hopped about him on the ground and mumbled his ankles with its toothless mouth.

Sick with nausea, Morris struggled against them. Time and again he kicked away the toad-like creature, which returned with noisome pertinacity. He could not loosen the ropy members of the headless horror, which had wrapped themselves about him in plastic folds. But his worst fear was that the griffin would tear open his leatheroid garments with its slicing beak. He hammered the huge bird-shaped body with his fists, driving it away repeatedly; but as if mad with rage or hunger, it re-assailed him. His legs and body were sore in a dozen places from the blows of the cruel beak.

Beyond his attackers, he caught involuntary glimpses of the horrid feast that was being enjoyed by their fellows. It was like the feeding of harpies in some infernal circle; and Morris could surmise his own imminent fate all too clearly. He saw that several of the feeders, quitting their half-eaten provender, were turning in his direction as if to join the three assailants.

Instinctively, as he fought on, he heard the sound of a measured drumming from above. The sound drew nearer and ceased. In a turn of the eddying combat, he saw that two gigantic beings had arrived among the monsters, and were standing a little apart, as if watching the gruesome orgy with detached interest.

Even amid the frightful preoccupation of his struggles, he noticed a strange thing. The new arrivals, alone of all the life-forms that he and Markley had met in this erratic world, seemed to approximate a common

type of physical development. Both of them stood erect, and their conformation was vaguely human in its outlines, except for the enormous wings, ribbed and leathery as those of ancient pterodactyls, which hung half-folded at their backs. Their coloration was a dark, bituminous brown, verging upon ebon blackness in the wings, and lightened somewhat in their heads and faces. They were massively built, with a stature of eleven or twelve feet, and aquiline, sloping, hairless heads that denoted a large brain-capacity. No trace of ears could be detected; but two round, luminous, golden-yellow eyes were set far apart in their faces above sphinx-like mouths and nostrils. Somehow they made Morris think of Satanic angels; but their aspect was not malign, and was wholly poised, aloof and dispassionate.

Such were the impressions that he received, without conscious assortment or definition at the time. Without interlude, the atrocious battle with the three monsters continued. Presently, however, one of the gigantic winged beings came with prodigious strides toward the earth-man and his attackers, as if to watch the uneven combat. Morris felt the regard of the great yellow eyes, which, inscrutable themselves, appeared to search him through and read the inmost secrets of his mind.

The being stepped closer, lifting an enormous hand in a leisurely but imperious gesture. As if fearful or cognizant of a superior power, the loathsome assailants abandoned their efforts to drag Morris down, and slunk away to assuage their hunger on an un-preempted carrion that lay beside the pit in the crater's bottom.

A dreadful faintness surged upon the earth-man — a reaction from all the intolerable horrors and fatigues of the day. Amid the whirling darkness into which he slid, he saw the gleaming of two mesmeric golden eyes, and felt the firm grasp of giant hands that seemed to support and lift him.

An electric shock ran through him at their touch. Miraculously, his faintness cleared away, leaving him wonderfully alert. Strength seemed to flow into him from the mighty hands: magnetic strength, buoyant and preterhuman. The horror faded from his shaken nerves, he was no longer lost and bewildered, but was filled with a mystic confidence.

The experience that he now underwent was perhaps the strangest of all that befell him in the dimension of chance. Also, it was the hardest to remember or describe.

Beneath the thrilling touch of the winged being, whose hands held him firmly by the shoulders, he seemed almost to pass beyond his own consciousness. Thoughts that were not his own rose up and limned themselves with the clearness of actual visions or objective impressions. In some ineffable way, he shared for a moment the thoughts and memories of the being who had rescued him from the monsters. Whether or not an intentional telepathy was being exerted, he never quite knew; but alien vistas, beheld through unfamiliar senses, appeared to open before him.

The two winged beings, he knew, were members of a race that was far from numerous. They were the rulers of this outlandish world, the self-made masters of its incalculable forces and disorganized elements. Their evolution had been supremely difficult and painful. Through their own volition, they had risen from a state that was little higher than that of the unhappy monsters. They had developed faculties that enabled them to circumvent the lawlessness of their environment, to forecast its very randomness, and impose law and order on the ever-changing chaos. They had even learned to control their own development.

The nightmare hollow in which Morris stood had temporarily vanished. There came to him the sense of tremendous flight above strange horizons. He seemed to pass on lofty wings over wastes of chaotically piled and

tumbled rocks with the being whom he knew as one of the Masters of Chance. Amid the shifting mirages of desolation, through distorting zones of air, above realms that pitched obliquely for immeasurable leagues, like the flattened side of some malformed planet, he flew unerringly to his destination.

Beyond the chaos, on tiered mountains that rose stupendously, he beheld the high and many-terraced citadels of the Masters. As if he had trodden their battlements, he knew the white walls of a majestically ordered architecture that defied the erratic formlessness of the world beneath, and imposed their harmonic sternness on the tumbled waste. He knew the terraces, lined with geometric rows of trees and flowers, in which, by some miracle of horticultural mastery, the random flora had been subdued and had taken on the characters of type and species.

Dimly, to the limit of his human thought-capacity, he understood something of the Masters. Their powers were those of dynamic will, of magnetism and sense-development; and they did not depend entirely on mere physical science or machinery. In former ages, they had been more numerous, had ruled a larger area of that unstable, incalculably treacherous world. It seemed that the apex of their evolution had passed, though still powerful, they were menaced more and more by the beleaguering forces of cosmic anarchy.

Such were the things that Morris learned in that moment of communion with his rescuer. Returning to his own proper consciousness, he felt also that the telepathic interchange had been mutual: the being had read his own history, his predicament of hopeless alienation in a strange world; and in some inscrutably benign way, was minded to help him.

He felt no surprise, whatever, at the more than outré happenings that ensued. Somehow, as if he shared the ability of his protector to read the

future, all that occurred was familiar as a twice-told tale. In this bizarre but fore-known drama, the winged being lifted him gently but firmly, making a cradle of its vast arms, and spreading its ebon wings, mounted swiftly toward the misshapen sun. Its companion followed; and Morris knew, as they flew steadily above the changing zones of gravitation, above the dreary jumble of wandering mirages, that they were seeking for Markley.

In a dim, partial, way, he seemed to share the clairvoyance of the Masters, which enabled them to distinguish the real from the illusory amid the disordered refraction of their atmosphere. He, too, was gifted with a televisual faculty by which he could scan the remote or hidden portions of the waste.

Sure and undeviating, the mighty leathern wings beat onward toward their goal. Amid the kaleidoscopes of desolation, there appeared the rough rim of the valley in which Morris and Markley had left their rocket plane.

Swifter grew the beating of the wings, louder was their drumming, as if haste were needed. A strange anxiety mounted in Morris, lest they should be too late.

Now they hovered above the valley, slanting groundward. The place had changed, in some fashion that Morris could not define to himself for a moment. Then he realized that certain of the ringing bluffs and slopes had crumbled away, were still crumbling, to form a moving sea of hueless sand. In places, columns of atomic powder mounted like geysers; some of the areas of forestation had fallen into shapeless heaps of dust, like disintegrated fungi. These sudden, erratic, localized decompositions of matter were common phenomena of the world of chance; and it came to Morris, as part of his mystic knowledge, that the order which the Masters had wrested from chaos was not wholly secure against their inroads.

Anxiously, with a breathless fear, he scanned the area into which the mighty being who carried him was descending on sloped wings. Markley was somewhere in that area, to which he had wandered back in a blind, bewildered search for his lost companion; and danger — a double danger — threatened him now.

As if with the keen, straight-seeing eyes of the Master, Morris discerned a rocket plane on the valley floor, and knew it to be the one that the Japanese had used. Seemingly it was deserted, and the moving tide of sand from the crumbling cliffs engulfed it even as he watched.

In the middle of the valley, he described the glittering of another plane — the one that belonged to Markley. Four tiny figures were milling to and fro beside it, as if in wild combat. Upon them, unheeded, the deluge of dissolution was advancing swiftly. The sands rolled in crested billows. The trees swelled and soared to monstrous arboreal phantoms, and dissolved in pulverous clouds. Pillars of freed molecules built themselves up from the valley-bottom, and were shaped into ominous, floating domes that obscured the sun.

It was a scene of elemental terror and silent tumult. Across it, sloping and dipping, the wings of the Masters drummed, till they hovered above the knot of struggling figures.

Three men in helmets and air-suits were attacking a fourth, who was similarly attired. The weakness of the local gravity, however, made the combat less unequal than it might have seemed. Also, it served to lighten the blows which the contestants succeeded in delivering.

Markley, in great, twenty-foot leaps, was eluding the Japanese much of the time; but plainly he was tiring; and the three would corner him soon. Several automatic pistols, discarded as if empty or useless, were lying on

the ground; but one of the Japanese had drawn an ugly, curved knife, and was watching his chance for a thrust at the darting figure of Markley.

In their desperate struggle, none of the four had perceived the arrival of the Masters. It was Markley who saw them first. As if stupefied, he paused in one of his rushes, and stared at Morris and the winged beings.

Two of the Japanese turned and also beheld the hovering figures. They stood as if petrified with astonishment or terror. But the third, intent on delivering a thrust with his wicked knife, had not seen them; and he flew in a long, aerial leap at Markley.

The second Master, hanging in air beside Morris' protector, raised his right hand and pointed at the flying Japanese. For an instant, his fingers seemed to clutch and hurl a great javelin of living fire. The javelin leapt and faded — and the Japanese, a shapeless pile of fuming cinders, lay at Markley's feet.

The other two, shielding their goggled eyes with their hands, as if the terrible lance of light had blinded them, rushed toward the oncoming storm of atomic disintegration. Before them, on the valley floor, a sudden pillar of dust ascended, swelling awfully as it ate the conglomerate soil. It seemed to topple upon them — and they were gone.

Morris, watching in wordless awe, felt that the lifting arms had been withdrawn — that his feet had been set on the ground. Close above him, the two Masters towered, with spread wings. As if an urgent voice had spoken aloud, he knew the things that must be done without delay.

“Come — we can start the plane!” he cried to Markley. “We’ve got to move in a hurry.”

Markley, who had been staring at the Masters, appeared to emerge from a sort of trance.

“All right, if you say so — and if the fuel will explode,” he agreed. “But before we go, I’d like to thank your winged friend for browning Sakamoto. I don’t know how it was done; but he sure has a wicked jolt. That Jap would have laid me open like a gutted fish, in another split-second.”

A sudden, howling wind blew down the valley, spreading the dust-billows like a blown spray, and lifting the atomic columns into a roof of doom. Swiftly the storm of dissolution gathered, rushing toward the plane.

Markley, following by Morris, sprang for the open manhole. While Morris swung the heavy lid into place, his companion leapt to the control-board. As if by some miracle of chance, or some change in the unknown, interfering force, his pressure of the starting-lever was answered by the loud roar of discharging rockets. The plane lifted, acquiring momentum, till it soared above the seething valley.

Looking back through one of the ports, Morris perceived the two flying colossi, who hung aloof in the heavens, as if watching the departure of the plane. Serene, impassive, on poised wings, they floated beyond the atomic storm, which had already begun to subside.

He turned away with a strange awe, a reverential gratitude. Beneath Markley’s skilful guidance, the plane was heading straight for the formless atmospheric blur that still blotted the reddish-brown sky.

Again Morris looked back. High, far and tiny, between the malformed sun and the chaotically strewn and riven world, the mysterious beings whom he knew as the Masters of Chance flew steadily on level wings toward their remote city. It was his last sight of them; and already the mystic knowledge that had been imparted to him was fading a little in his brain.

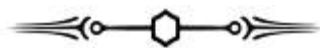
The telepathic vision of the citadels that imposed their severe architectural ordination on a mad terrain; the supernal, hard-won power of

the Masters, battling perpetually against lawless elements and the treacherous, intractable forces of a cosmic Pandemonium — all had become slightly unreal, like a dreamland from which the dreamer is departing.

Now the blind aerial blur had enveloped the vessel. Greyness, clinging and all-pervasive, filled it like an atmosphere of cotton-wool. Sight, sound — even feeling and thought — were lost as if in some hinterland of oblivion.

Out of the blur, as if from a formless, hueless dream of death between two lives, the plane and its occupants floated into the dark azure of the terrene stratosphere. Sight, consciousness, feeling, memory, returned in a sudden flood to Morris and Markley. Below them again, they saw in mottled relief the familiar reaches of Nevada, edged with white and saw-like mountains.

The Metamorphosis of Earth



IN THE YEAR 2197, the first intimation of a strange peril of world-wide scope and gravity came and passed unrecognized for what it really was in the form of a newspaper dispatch from the Sahara, reporting a sand-storm of unprecedented fury. Several oases, according to the report, had been entirely blotted out, and a number of caravans had been lost in the sweep of the tremendous storm, which had towered to a height of twelve thousand feet and had covered many hundred square miles. No one caught in it had come out alive nor had any trace of the missing caravans been found. Subsequent dispatches brought the news that the affected region was full of minor upheavals for weeks after the cessation of the main disturbance, and that a furore of superstitious fear had been excited among the desert tribes, who believed that the end of the world was now imminent. But, in the surge and press of more sensational and apparently more important items then engaging the world's attention, no one, not even the most advanced and alert men of science, gave more than a passing thought to the sandstorm.

Toward the end of the same year, there came a fresh report from the Sahara, this time of so strange and inexplicable a nature that it immediately aroused the curiosity of many scientists, who forthwith formed an expedition to investigate the conditions that had given rise to the report. The members of a caravan from Timbuctoo, the first to venture into the path of the great storm, had returned within a week, half-mad with terror and telling incoherently of unaccountable changes that had taken place all through the disturbed area. They said that the long, rolling dunes of sand had all disappeared, to be replaced by solid earth and mineral forms such as no one

had ever seen before. The earth consisted of great patches of a sort of violet-colored clay, very moist, and with a noxious odor that had almost overpowered those who ventured to walk upon it.

Also, there were outcroppings, immense ledges, and even hills of singular stone and metals. The stone was mainly crystallized, with red, black, blue and dark-green colors, and the metals were white and iridescent. The members of the caravan swore that they had seen huge boulders heave visibly from the earth before their eyes, and had watched the crystals swell on the sides of these boulders. Over all the changed area, they said, there were vapors that arose continually, forming a dense canopy of cloud that shut out the sun. But, in spite of this fad, the heat was more intense than any they had ever known, and had an intolerably humid character. Another odd thing they had noticed was, that the sand immediately contiguous to this area had become so fine and pulverous that it soared in high clouds at every step of their camels, who had almost been engulfed in it. They all believed implicitly that Iblees, the Mohammedan Satan, had come to establish his kingdom on earth, and, as a preparatory measure, was creating for himself and his subject demons a suitable soil and atmosphere resembling those of the infernal realms. Henceforth, the region was utterly shunned, till the arrival of the investigating scientists, headed by Roger Lapham, the most renowned American geologist of the period. II Lapham and his party, in which were several celebrated chemists as well as some fellow-geologists, had chartered two airplanes, and the trip to Timbuctoo, where they paused to interview personally the members of the returned caravan, was a matter of only a few hours.

A new and unexpected angle was added to the strange story, when the scientists learned that eight of the twelve natives whom they desired to see had fallen dangerously ill in the interim since the sending of the last news

dispatch. So far, no one had been able to diagnose their illness, which had presented a combination of symptoms no less inexplicable than unfamiliar. These symptoms were quite varied, and differed somewhat in the individual cases, though acute respiratory and mental disorders were common to all. Several of the men had shown a violent homicidal mania which they were already too weak and ill to carry to the point of action; others had tried to commit suicide in a sudden and delirious excess of melancholia and nervous terror; and six of the eight were afflicted with peculiar cutaneous disturbances which would have suggested leprosy if it had not been that the diseased portions, which developed and increased with remarkable rapidity, were of a bright green color instead of being white, and had purplish borders. The Pulmonary symptoms were not dissimilar to those experienced by men who have inhaled some sort of deadly gas, and were marked by a swift eating-away of the tissues. Two of the men died on the evening of the same day that Lapham and his companions arrived in Timbuctoo, and by noon of the following day the four who had been so far exempt were stricken down. They suffered all the symptoms presented by their fellows, with the addition, even during the earlier stages, of a form of locomotor ataxia and a queer disorder of vision which constituted an inability to see plainly in broad daylight, though their sight was normal at other times. They, as well as most of the others, now developed a terrible condition of necrosis involving the whole bony structure of the body, and within two days all were dead.

Lapham and his brother-scientists talked with these men and did what little could be done to palliate their agonies. No more could be learned, however, than the news-dispatches had already proffered in the way of information, apart from the fact that the caravan-members attributed their illness to contact with the uncanny clay and minerals on which they had

come in the heart of the Sahara. Those who had ventured the furthest into the strange area had been the first to develop this illness.

It became evident to the scientists that their proposed explorations might be accompanied by grave bodily dangers. One of the planes was immediately sent to England for a supply of gas masks, oxygen, an complete suits of an insulative material designed to protect against everything then known to science in the form of harmful radio-activity.

As soon as the planes returned, bringing the requisite supplies, the journey into the Sahara was resumed. Following at an altitude of one thousand feet the northern caravan route toward Insalab and Ghadarnes, the scientists soon began to penetrate the Juf desert, amid whose golden-yellow dunes the affected area was said to lie.

An odd spectacle now presented itself to them. Far-off on the horizon was a low-lying mass of clouds or vapors — a thing almost without precedent in that dry, rainless region. These clouds or vapors were of a pearly-gray color, and they covered not only hundreds of leagues of the rolling sand, or what had once been sand, but also seemed to encroach upon the rocky, weather-worn terrain to east of the Juf. Nothing could be seen of the geological changes that had taken place, till the airplanes had approached within a few miles of the vapor-mass. Then the exploring party had a glimpse of the van-colored soil and minerals described by the natives, now dimly discernible through the writhing fumes that still arose from them.

Before landing, the scientists flew slowly above the vapors to determine their extent and density. They found that the mass was circular in form and was at least a hundred miles in diameter. It constituted a level and uniform floor, dazzlingly bright in the sunshine, and with no breaks or variations anywhere.

After crossing and circumnavigating the whole cloud-mass, a landing was made near the southern verge, and the expedition proceeded to encamp. The day was still new, since they had made an early start; and Lapham and the others were eager to begin their investigations without delay. Putting on their insulative suits and equipping themselves with the gas-masks and oxygen-tanks, the whole party set out forthwith.

They had not gone far when they encountered the fine sand or dust of which the caravan-members had spoken. They sank to the waist in this sand at every step, but its inconceivable lightness made their progress not so difficult as it would normally have been. At every footfall, at every touch or movement, the fine powder soared in a huge cloud, which, as they had occasion to observe, took hours to settle itself again. None of them had ever seen such dust before, and the chemists in the party could scarcely wait to analyze it.

At last, after much wandering and floundering in the dust-cloud, through which they could see nothing, Lapham and his companions drew themselves out on a margin of the strange violet soil. The contrast of this wet, steaming clay with the gulfs of atom-like powder that surrounded it was so inexplicable, so utterly amazing as to baffle and dumbfound all conjecture. The substance was unearthly in its bizarreness, and the heat that emanated from it was almost beyond endurance. The scientists had sweltered in their heavy air-tight suits while crossing the zone of dust, but now they were subjected to actual suffering.

At every step their astonishment grew, for the dim landscape beneath the vapors was such as no human eye had even seen before. Gigantic ledges of crystallized rock-forms arose in the foreground, and about the crystals there was something, even apart from their curious black, blue, red and dark-green coloration, which served to differentiate them from anything

classified by geologists. They were prodigious in size, and had innumerable facets and a look of geometrical complexity foreign to all normal rocks. There was a sinister vitality in their aspect, too, and the tale of the natives, who purported to have seen them grow and swell, became almost comprehensible. Somehow, they resembled living organisms as much as minerals. Everywhere, also, were outcroppings of the white and iridescent metals that had been described.

As the party advanced, the ledges grew larger, and towered overhead in cuffs and precipices and crags, among which the explorers found a tortuous, winding way. The crags were horned and beetling, and weird beyond imagination. It was like a scene in some other world; and nothing to which the scientists came in the course of their wanderings was in any manner suggestive of the familiar Terra Firma.

After groping their way through narrow rifts and along the rim of Fantastic scarps where all foothold was precarious, they emerged amid the crags, on the shelving shore of a lake of blackish-green water, whose full extent was indeterminate. Lapham, who was ahead of the others, half-lost in the coils of the rising vapors, cried out suddenly, and when his companions overtook him, they found him stooping above a queer plant with etiolated fungus-like stalk and broad, serrate leaves of a carnal crimson, mottled with gray blotches. Around it, the pinkish lips of younger plants were protruding from the soil, and they seemed to wax visibly beneath the astounded gaze of the explorers.

“What on earth is it ?” cried Lapham.

“As far as I can see, it isn’t anything that could legitimately exist on earth,” rejoined Sylvester, one of the chemists, who had made a sideline of botany. They all gathered about the queer plant and examined it minutely. The leaves and stalks were extremely fibrous in their texture and were full

of deep pores like those of coral. But when Lapham tried to break off a portion, it proved to be very tough and rubbery, and the use of a knife was necessitated before the branch could be severed. The plant writhed and twisted like a living creature at the touch of the knife, and when the operation was finally accomplished, a juice that bore a startling resemblance to blood in its color and consistency, began to exude slowly. The severed section was placed in a knapsack for future analysis.

Now the scientists proceeded toward the margin of the lake. Here they found some plant-growths of a different type, suggesting calamites, or giant reeds. These plants were twenty feet tall and were divided into a dozen segments with heavy, swollen-looking joints. They had no leaves, and their hues varied from a leaden purple to a leprous white with green shadowings and veinings. Although there was no wind, all of them were swaying a little, with a sound like the hissing of serpents. As Lapham and his confreres came closer, they saw that the reeds were covered with lip-like formations that recalled the suckers of an octopus.

Sylvester was now in advance of the others. As he neared the foremost plant, the thing swayed suddenly forward with all the suppleness and celerity of a python and encircled the chemist in a series of constricting coils. Sylvester screamed in terror as the coils tightened about him, and the others ran instantly to his aid, though dumb-founded and well-nigh stupefied by the strangeness of the happening. Several of them carried clasp-knives, and these were at once requisitioned in effecting his release. Lapham and two of the chemists began to hack and saw at the horrible coils, while the reed continued its constriction about the limbs and body of the helpless man.

The plant was amazingly tough and resistant, and Lapham's knife-blade broke before he had sawed half through the section upon which he was

engaged. His companions, however, were more successful, and at length the diabolical growth was severed in two places, one of which was not far from the root. But the coils still clung around their victim, who had gone suddenly pale and limp, and who now fell in a dead faint as his companions finished their task. It was found that some of the sucker-like formations had penetrated his insulative suit and were actually embedded in his flesh. Slowly, in squirming segments, the coils were cut away; but nothing could be done at present with the suckers, for want of the proper surgical instruments; and it was obviously imperative that Sylvester should be taken back to camp as quickly as possible.

Carrying the still unconscious man among them by turns, the explorers retraced their steps amid the crags and ledges of many-colored crystals, along the perilous rim of steaming cliffs and gulfs, and found their way through the zone of atomic dust, till they re-emerged, altogether exhausted and frightfully shaken, on the shore of the natural desert. In spite of their urgent haste, however, they took with them some specimens of the crystals, of the white and iridescent metals and the violet soil, as well as parts of the python-like reed, for future examination; and they greatly deplored their inability to secure also some of the water in the blackish-green lake. After the chemist's experience, no one would have dared to venture among the fringing reeds along its shore. Sylvester required immediate attention, for he was white and bloodless as a vampire's victim, and his pulse-beats were very slow and so feeble as to be almost undetectable. His clothing was removed and he was stretched on an improvised operating-table. It was now seen that the portions of his limbs and trunk in which the suckers had implanted themselves were horribly swollen and discolored; and this swelling rendered the task of removal all the more difficult. There was nothing to do but cut the suckers out; and after the administration of an

opiate, which seemed scarcely needful under the circumstances, the operation was performed by Dr. Adams, the physician of the party. It was evident that Sylvester had been dreadfully poisoned by the suckers, for even after their removal, the flesh in which they had sunk continued to swell, and soon turned to a putrescent black which threatened to involve his whole body. At no time did he recover full consciousness, though during the night after the explorers' return, he began to toss and mutter weakly in a sort of low delirium, which presently merged into a coma from which he did not awaken. At ten the next morning, Dr. Adams announced that Sylvester was dead. It was necessary to inter him at once, for his body presented the appearance and all the usual characteristics of a week-old corpse.

A sense of ominous gloom and oppression was thrown over the whole party by the chemist's fate, but it was of course felt that nothing should be permitted to delay, or interfere with, the work of investigation that had been undertaken. No sooner had the unfortunate Sylvester been laid to rest in a hurried grave amid the Saharan sands, when his fellow-scientists began eagerly their examination of the specimens they had secured. These were all studied under powerful microscopes and were subjected to chemical analysis of the most searching and rigorous order. Many known constituents were found, but all of these were immingled with elements for which chemistry had no names. The molecular formation of the crystals was more intricate than that of any substance known on earth; and the metals were heavier than anything so far discovered. The cellular composition of the two plant-forms was oddly similar to that of animal bodies, and it was readily ascertained that they were intermediate between the animal and vegetable kingdoms, partaking of the character of both. How such minerals and plants could have appeared suddenly, in a location so obviously impossible even for the fostering of normal forms, was a theme of endless argument and

inconclusive surmise between Lapham and his confreres. For a while, no one could propound a theory that seemed at all plausible Or credible. Apart from everything else, they were puzzled by the zone of fine dust about the changed area: this zone was found to consist of sand-particles whose very molecules had been partially broken up and disintegrated.

“It looks,” said Lapham, “as if someone or something had blown up all the atoms in this part of the Sahara, and had then started a totally new process of re-integration and evolution, with the development of soil, water, minerals, atmosphere and plants such as could never have existed on the earth during any of its geological epochs.”

This startling theory was discussed pro and con, and was finally adopted as the only explanation that contained elements of plausibility. But it remained to determine the agency of the geological and evolutionary changes; and of course no one could propound anything decisive as to the nature of the agency. The whole thing was enough to stagger the imagination of a Jules Verne; and with scientists of such indubitable rectitude as Lapham and his fellows, the fantasies of lawless imagination had no place. They were concerned only with things that could be verified and proven according to natural laws.

Several days were devoted to analyzing, re-analyzing and theorizing. Then a report of the conditions that had been found was drawn up, and it was decided to send a summary of this report by radio to Europe and America. An attempt to use the radios carried by the party revealed a peculiar condition of absolute static that prevailed above the vapor-covered region. No messages could be sent or received across this region, though communication was readily established with points that were not in a direct line with the new area, such as Rome, Cairo, Petrograd, Havana and New Orleans. This condition of static was permanent — at least, many reported

efforts, at all hours of the day and night, were utterly ineffectual. One of the planes, carrying a radio-apparatus, soared to a height of nine thousand feet above the encampment and sought to establish the desired connection, but in vain. It was necessary for the plane to cross the whole cloud-mass, to the northern side, before New York and London could receive and return its messages. "It would seem," observed Lapham, "as if some sort of ultra-powerful ray, that prevents the passage of radio vibrations, had been turned on this part of the Sahara. Evidently there is a screen of interfering force,"

While arguments as to the validity of this theory, the nature and origin of the conjectural rays, and their possible relation to the geologic changes, were still in progress, two members of the party complained of feeling ill. Both of them, on examination by Dr. Adams, were discovered to be afflicted with cutaneous symptoms resembling those that had been developed by many of the caravan from Timbuctoo. The characteristic patches of bright green, with purplish borders, were spreading rapidly on their arms and shoulders, and soon invaded the exposed portions of the skin. The two men became mildly delirious within a few hours, and gave evidence of extreme nervous depression. Simultaneously with this turn of their illness, Dr. Adams himself grew conscious of a sudden feeling of indisposition. Obviously, the insulative clothing worn by the explorers had been inadequate for their protection against whatever lethal forces were inherent in the new soil, minerals and vapor. laden atmosphere. It was decided that the party must return to civilization immediately, before others should be stricken.

Camp was broken up, and the two planes were headed for Great Britain. During the brief journey, all of the scientists began to fall ill, and the pilot of one of the planes collapsed, allowing the contrivance air-vessel to plunge into the Atlantic near the coast of Spain. The crew of the second plane,

seeing the accident, flew gallantly to the rescue, and succeeded in saving Lapham and Dr. Adams, who were struggling in the waters. Their companions, including the sick pilot, were all drowned. It was a sad remnant of the expedition which landed at London. III In the meanwhile, the summary of the explorers' report, dispatched with so much difficulty by radio, had been published in all the leading dailies of the world and had aroused universal interest amid the scientific fraternity. The press was full of theories and conjectures, some of them extremely wild and fantastic. One journal went so far as to insinuate that the Saharan manifestations were part of a plan for world-domination that was being put into practice by the United Oriental Federation, which then included China, Indo-China, Burma, and Japan; and others were inclined to name Russia as the instigator. On the very same day when Lapham and his companions reached London, there came from the United States the news of a terrible and mysterious cataclysm, which had occurred in Missouri and which had involved at least half of this state. Though the time was still mid-winter and the ground was covered with unmelting snow, a tremendous storm of dust had appeared, in which many towns and cities, including St. Louis, had been utterly swallowed up. All communications with these towns and cities had been cut off, and no message, no living thing nor evidence of life, had come forth from the storm. There were great billowing clouds, that soared to a stupendous height, and from which emerged a sound like the rumbling of thunder, or the explosion of unaccountable tons of dynamite. The dust, of unbelievable fineness, settled upon many miles of the adjacent areas, and nothing could be done or determined for days, since all who dared to approach the raging storm were instantly lost and never returned. The terror and mystery of a cataclysm so unparalleled, so far beyond all explanation or imagination, fell like a black pall upon the United States, and horrified the

whole civilized world. The dust from the storm, which was analyzed at once, was found to consist of partially disintegrated molecules; and it required no great reach of fantasy for scientists, reporters and the general public to associate the upheaval with the Saharan sand-storm that had given birth to a terrain of unearthly strangeness.

The news was brought to Lapham and his fellows in the hospital to which they had been taken from the plane. Several of the party were too ill to comprehend intelligently what had taken place; but Lapham and Dr. Adams, both of whom were less severely stricken than the others, were at once prepared to comment on the report from America. "I believe," said Lapham, "that some cosmic process has been instituted which may threaten the integrity and even the continued existence of our world — at least, of any world which we could call ours, and in which human beings could dwell and survive. I predict that within a few weeks, geological and atmospheric conditions similar to those which we found in the Sahara will also prevail in Missouri." This prophetic utterance, made to reporters from the Times and the Daily Mail, received considerable publicity and added to the world-wide consternation and terror that was being felt. While dispatches announcing the continuation of the atomic storm were still agitating five continents, several of the returned explorers died from the unknown malady by which they had been seized. Their cases were characterized by nearly all the symptoms that had been noted in the members of the unfortunate caravan from Timbuctoo, but lacked the pulmonary disorders, from which, it was evident, the use of oxygen-tanks had saved the expedition. Extreme weakness, melancholia, the green, leprous patches, locomotor ataxia, partial blindness and the final necrosis of the bones were all present, and little could be done to mitigate them by any of the attendant doctors, among whom were the most renowned specialists

of Great Britain, France, and America. Lapham and Dr. Adams were the only members of the party who survived, and neither of them was ever wholly well at any future time. Till the end of their days, both men suffered from more or less mental depression and From recurrent outbreaks of the cutaneous symptoms.

An odd aftermath of the whole affair was, that similar maladies were contracted in a milder degree by many scientists who examined the mineral and vegetable specimens that had been carefully brought back from Africa by the expedition. No one could isolate or identify the properties that gave rise to such disorders; but it was assumed that rays belonging to the ultra-violet or infra-red ranges, and more powerful than anything hitherto discovered, were being given off by the odd substances. These rays, it was all too evident, were deleterious to human health and life.

While Lapham and Dr. Adams were still lying in hospital, fresh news-items continued to come from America. One of these items was, that two planes, driven by world-famous aviators, had tried to surmount the terrific dust-storm that still raged in Missouri. The storm, like its Saharan fellow, was about twelve thousand feet in height, and it was not thought that any difficulty would be encountered in crossing it at a sufficient altitude. Also, it was believed that some valuable data might be gathered thereby. The planes flew to an elevation of thirteen thousand before approaching the borders of the storm, but on passing above the rim of the involved area, they were both seen to disappear suddenly in a mid-air by people who were watching their flight with field glasses. neither of the planes ever returned to earth, nor could any sign of them be located.

“Fools!” cried Lapham, when he heard the news of their disappearance. “Of course, when they invaded the vertical area of the storm, they were exposed to the same disintegrative influences that are operating on the earth

below. These influences, as I surmised, are coming from outer space. The planes and their aviators have been dissolved into sub-molecular dust,”

No more attempts were made to cross the storm, and a widespread exodus of people from the adjacent regions, which had been going on ever since the initial cataclysm, became almost universal in the next few days. Hardly anyone remained, with the exception of a few redoubtable scientists, who wished to be on the ground for purposes of investigation when the upheaval should subside.

Within a week, the storm began to lessen in height and fury, and the clouds became broken and less dense. But, as in the case of the African disturbance, there were minor agitations and upswirlings for another week or more. Then it was perceived that masses of vapor were replacing the dust; and a solid canopy of pearly-gray cloud was soon formed above the whole region. All around this region, the winter snows were buried beneath a mile-wide zone of the sub-molecular powder.

In spite of the awful fate that had befallen the Timbuctoo caravan and the geological expedition, there were several scientists brave enough to venture within the St. Louis area when the rising vapors gave proof that the processes of disintegration were at an end. They found the same exotic soil, the same minerals, uxietales and water that had been discovered in the heart of the Juf desert; but the alien plant-forms had not yet begun to appear. Some of the water was secured for analysis: apart from the usual constituents of water, it was found to contain an element oddly similar to a certain synthetic gas, more lethal than anything hitherto devised, which had lately been invented for use in warfare. This element, however, was not decomposable into the separate elements from which its analogue had been formed by American chemists. Still another gaseous component was isolated, but could not be identified or allied with anything familiar to

chemistry. Scarcely had the analysis been completed and its results given to the world, when the chemists who had undertaken the analysis, and also the investigators who had obtained the water, were all stricken down with an illness which differed in certain ways from the one that had been undergone by their Saharan predecessors. All the usual symptoms were presented; and co-incidentally there was a falling-out of all the hair on the heads, faces, limbs and bodies of those affected, till not even the finest down remained. Then the places where the hair had been were covered with a gray formation resembling mould. The formation, on being analyzed, was proven to consist of minute vegetable organisms which increased with remarkable fecundity and soon began to eat the skin and flesh beneath. No antiseptic could combat the ravages of the gray mould, and the victims died in atrocious agony within a few hours. It was surmised that the water must have given rise to these new symptoms, by some process of infection; but how the infection could have occurred was a mystery, since all manner of possible precautions had been taken in handling the water.

A little before the death of these hardy investigators, two singular astronomical discoveries were made. Lapham's theory that rays of an ultra-powerful type were being turned upon the earth from some ulterior source, had led to an intensive study of the neighboring planets, particularly of Mars and Venus, through the new telescopes with three hundred-inch reflectors, with which observatories in Colorado and the Spanish Pyrenees had been equipped. It was thought that the rays might be emanating from one of the planets. Mars, by this time, was definitely known to be inhabited, but little had been yet learned about Venus, on account of the cloudy envelope with which that world is surrounded. Now, under the close continual scrutiny to which it was subjected, three flashes of white light, occurring at intervals of seventy minutes and lasting for about ninety

seconds, were seen to pierce the cloudy envelope, in a region not far from the equator of Venus. The three flashes emanated from the same spot. A little later during the same night, Dr. Malkin of the Colorado observatory, though all his interest was still centered upon the orb of Venus, now almost at meridian, was forced to observe within his field of vision a tiny satellite or asteroid which was apparently following the revolution of the earth. Observations were made, leading to the sensational discovery that this new satellite was no more than a thousand miles distant, and was paralleling the movement of the earth in a position exactly above the state of Missouri! Calculations revealed that it was about two hundred feet in diameter.

Dr. Malkin's two discoveries were announced to the world, and were followed the next day by a report from the Pyrenean observatory, telling of another tiny body that had been located far in the south, directly above the vapor-shrouded region in northern Africa. In size, movement and distance from the earth, this body was similar to the American satellite. The two announcements were the cause of much public excitement, and many conjectures were made as to the origin and character of the two minute bodies, whose very positions made it natural for everyone to connect them at once with the geological phenomena in the subjacent areas. It remained, however, for Roger Lapham to predict that the three flashes on Venus, observed by Dr. Malkin on the same night as his discovery of the first body would soon be followed by the appearance of three new satellites, and also by three more storms of dust in different parts of the world.

"I believe," said Lapham, "that the satellites are mechanical spheres that have been discharged from Venus, and that they contain living beings and also apparatus for the creation and use of the destructive and recompositive rays that have brought about the singular manifestations in Africa and America. The flashes that Dr. Malkin saw were doubtless caused by the

discharge of new spheres. And if Venus had been under continual observation by the new telescopes, two earlier flashes would have been seen, one preceding the atomic storm in Africa and the other the storm in America. I am at a loss to understand, however, why the two spheres were not observed long ago, since it is probable that they have been within telescopic range ever since the onset of the atomic storms” IV There was a great division of opinion among scientists, as well as among the general public, concerning the validity of Lapham’s theory on the origin of the satellites; but no one felt any doubt regarding their problematic relation to the dust-storms and the new terrains. It was perceived that the two orbs were different in color, the African orb inclining to a ruddy tint and the American to a bluish tone. But suddenly, under Dr. Malkin’s observation, two nights after the initial discovery, this latter orb took on the reddish hue of its African fellow. Lapham, on hearing of this, went so far as to venture a surmise that the changing colors of the sphere had some connection with the nature of the rays that were being emitted, and that probably the bluish color was associated with a ray promoting the integration of mineral forms, and the reddish with one that had relation to the development of vegetable life.

“What I think is,” he went on, “that the people of Venus are trying to establish in certain parts of our world, the geological, botanical and meteorological conditions that prevail in their own. The establishment of such conditions is no doubt preliminary to an attempt at invasion. The Venusians, it is likely, could no more exist under the conditions that are favorable to us, than we could under theirs. Therefore, before coming to earth, they must create for themselves a suitable environment in which their colonies can land. Certainly, the hot, steaming soil and vaporous

atmosphere, found in the Sahara and in Missouri, are similar to those that characterize the planet Venus.”

Though some were still incredulous, or unable to realize imaginatively what was taking place, a wave of terror inundated the world at the promulgation of this surmise. Hence-forward, the cool theorizing of Lapham and other scientists went on side by side with outbursts of frantic fear and of old-time religious hysteria on the part of the multitude. No one could know when and where the weird, extra-planetary menace would strike next, nor the possible scope of its operations; and the dread anticipation of this menace became a demoralizing and paralyzing force that affected more or less the field of nearly all human activities. The men of science, the astronomers, the chemists, the physicists, the inventors, the electricians, the medical brotherhood, were the only classes of society who, as a whole, went about their usual work with a quickening rather than a slackening of their faculties. Researches were rapidly begun in laboratories all over the world, to find medical agents that would be efficacious in fighting the new diseases caused by contact with the Venusian minerals, air, water, and vegetable forms; and in spite of the certain danger, many excursions were made into the vapor-hidden terrains to procure the needful substances for study in the various laboratories. The tale of resultant death and suffering was long and sad, and testified to the undaunted heroism of human scientists. Also, a number of inventors, who had long sought the secret of a process by which molecules and atoms could be broken up and re-integrated on a large scale, now redoubled their efforts in the hope of enabling humanity to combat the probable conversion of wide areas of the earth into foreign atomic patterns.

Four days after the publication of Lapham’s latest prophecy, there came the news of the three fresh storms he had predicted, at intervals of little

more than an hour. The first storm was in Mesopotamia, and Baghdad and Mosul were both lost in the towering columns of infinitesimal powder. The Tigris continued to flow into the area of the storm, but on the southern side it instantly ceased to run and soon became a dry bed till its junction with the Euphrates. The second storm occurred in the Black Forest, in Germany, and the third on the huge pampas of the Argentine. A new satellite, of a sulphur-yellow hue, was located above Germany by the Pyrenean telescope, as well as by those of many other observatories. The satellite above Mesopotamia was too far east to be within range of European astronomers; but the astronomers of two observatories in the Andes were successful in locating the Argentine body, which was also of a sulphur-yellow hue. This color, it was thought, might be associated with the production and use of the disintegrative ray.

The progress of a growing international panic was of course accelerated by the announcement of the new storms and satellites. People fled in numberless hordes from the neighborhood of the three disturbances, and grave social and economic conditions were created by this exodus. Certain industries were well-nigh paralyzed, traffic by air and land and water was seriously disordered; and the stock market of the world was thrown into dire confusion, many standard stocks becoming suddenly worthless. Even at this early stage of the Venusian encroachment, there were many consequences of a far-reaching and oftentimes unexpected order, in all realms of mortal existence and effort.

All of the visible satellites were kept under close observation. On the night following the discovery of the sulphur-yellow orb above the Black Forest, it was found that the ruddy Saharan satellite had disappeared from its station; and no clue to its whereabouts could be obtained till the arrival of rumors from Timbuctoo and Ghadames, telling of a strange meteor that

had fallen in broad daylight upon the region of massed vapors in El Juf. It had been watched by many desert tribesmen, by several caravans, and had been visible at a great distance, falling with preternatural and deliberate slowness, in a vertical line. It had seemed to descend for nearly a minute before dropping into the vapors. Its color was a bright silver, it was round in form, and had not left the usual trail of flame that is made by a large meteor. The desert peoples looked upon it as a portent, foretelling the advent of Iblees and his demons.

“The first Venusian colony has landed,” exclaimed Lapham, when these rumors were brought to him. “They have no doubt completed their evolutionary process, or have carried it to a degree that would render the African terrain inhabitable from their viewpoint.”

While abject fear prevailed among the multitudes of humanity, and while scientists were engaged in eager speculation as to the nature of the Venusians, the rays employed by them, and the manner in which their spheres had been propelled through space and held in suspension above the earth, a number of new flashes were perceived on Venus by the vigilant astronomers of Colorado and Spain. No less than nine of these flashes were detected at the customary intervals on the same night, and on the following night there were nine more. Others, however, must have occurred during the daylight hours, for within five days, in no less than thirty additional storms of atomic dust were reported from all over the world.

The areas of many were conterminant with the regions already affected, and were destined to extend enormously these regions; but many others were remotely scattered, and were to form independent nuclei for future manifestations. There were three storms in Australia, seven in Africa, six in Europe, six in Asia, five in the United States, and three in South America. Many more satellites, all of a sulphur-yellow hue, were located by

astronomers above the realms of devastation that were being established. The destruction wrought was appalling in its scope, for a dozen great cities and hundreds of towns in thickly peopled regions were turned into cosmic powder by the disintegrating force. Berlin, Vienna, Florence, Teheran, Jerusalem, Kabul, Samarkand, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Paul and Pittsburgh, had become in an instant no more

than memories. The Argentine tract was lengthening toward Buenos Aires; and the ravages in northern Africa had been extended as far as Lake Tchad, which had contributed a cloud of fine steam, twenty thousand feet in height, to the whirling tempest of minute sand-particles. Even amid the universal horror and confusion, it was noted that nearly all the storms were in regions remote from the terrestrial seaboard. Lapham, on being appealed to for an explanation of this fact, made the following statement:

“The process that is being carried on must inevitably be slow and gradual, on account of its tremendous magnitude; and many years will doubtless be required for its completion. The Venusians have selected inland areas for the nuclei of the geological and climatic metamorphosis, because the new atmospheres created above such areas will less readily be subject to immediate modification by the terrene oceans. However, if I am not mistaken, the seas themselves will eventually be attacked and will be vaporized and recondensed with the addition of elements favorable to the maintenance of Venusian air. The full extension of this latter process, on account of the lethal gases inherent-in such air, will prove fatal to all remaining animal, or perhaps even plant, life of terrene origin, even if the geological changes are left incomplete.” V Absolute madness and pandemonium were the concomitants of the thirty new storms. From the vicinity of all the centers involved. unending throngs of people poured in all directions toward the littorals of five continents. The entire shipping of the

world, both naval and aerial, was laden with men, women, and children who sought to flee the planetary peril; and those who were not fortunate enough to find room on any of the vessels, leapt into the surf or were driven from piers, cliffs and beaches by the pressure of the crowds behind. Innumerable thousands were drowned, while the streams of refugees came on day by day, night by night, utterly crazed with insensate terror, and more of the deadly satellites were appearing and more storms were being instituted. Town after town, city after city, countryside after countryside, was emptied of its inhabitants, hordes of whom were caught in the onset of additional upheavals. Heroic efforts were made by the police and military forces of all the nations, but not much could be done, beyond organizing many of the North American, European and Asiatic throngs for migration toward the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions.

In the midst of all this pandemonium and destruction, however, the laboratories of the world continued their investigations, though one by one many of them were lost in the molecular cataclysms. When the progress of the tracts of devastation became more and more extensive, the chemists, inventors, and various other experimenters concluded that it would be folly to remain any longer at their present posts. It was thought, from the general distribution of the storms, that the Antarctic circle would be the last portion of the globe that the invader would attack; and the scientists of all countries, uniting in a common cause, made immediate preparation to remove their equipments and build laboratories in the heart of the polar plateau. The work of removal, through the aid of giant airliners, was completed in an amazingly short period of time, though there were certain casualties and losses through the passage of planes above fresh regions that were being assailed by destructive rays.

Enough provisions for several years were carried along, and of course the wives and families of the various investigators accompanied them, as well as many thousands of people who were needed for work of a less expert, but essential, order. Whole towns of laboratories, as well as other buildings, were erected amid the Antarctic wastes, while the airliners returned to fetch more people and more supplies. The scientific colonies were joined by the passengers of hundreds of fugitive air-vessels that had been wandering above the seas; and soon a goodly remnant of every nation had found shelter behind the southern barriers of ice and snow. Something was also done to house and provision the hordes that had fled to the north; and as much communication as possible was kept up between the two streams of humanity.

Roger Lapham, who was now in a state of tolerable convalescence, was invited to join the colonies of investigators, and went south in one of the first air-liners. He had wished to lead another expedition into northern Africa, with the idea of again penetrating the Juf, where the supposed meteor had been seen to descend, but was finally dissuaded from this rash plan when word came that the African terrain was now surrounded on all sides by violent upheavals, one of which had destroyed Timbuctoo.

To the colonies about the southern pole, there came the daily news of how the fearful work of planetary destruction and reintegration was progressing, from radio operators who were brave enough to remain at their posts till an unresponding silence offered proof that they had been annihilated one by one with the realms in which their stations had stood. The Venusian soil and air, with outlying fringes of atomic dissolution, were spreading like a series of cancers through the five continents, through regions that were almost emptied of human life by this time. The heavens were filled with the tiny satellites of changing colors, a score of which had

descended to earth and had not been seen to rise again. What their occupants might now be doing was a mystery that intrigued all of the scientific fraternity. They felt the need of definite knowledge regarding these alien life-forms, who were obviously possessed of a high type of intelligence, and who displayed mechanical resources and a mastery of physics to which humanity had not yet attained. VI A radio dispatch from a lonely village in southern Florida brought to the Antarctic laboratories the news that one of the silver spheres, had been seen close at hand by human beings for the first time. An orange-grower who had refused to abandon his plantation at the flight. of nearly all his neighbors, with his twelve-year-old son, who had remained with him, had observed the sphere flying toward them within a mile of the earth's surface, in a south-easterly direction. Apparently it had emerged from a partially converted tract involving Kentucky, Tennessee, and the northern borders of Alabama, where more than one of the spheres had already been known to land. The thing was flying slowly, at less than thirty miles an hour when first noticed; and it came gently to earth within three hundred yards of the orange-grower and his son, close to the edge of the orchard. The sphere seemed to be made of some whitish metal, was perfectly round, was at least two hundred feet in diameter, and had no visible projections anywhere. It resembled a miniature world or moon. When it approached the ground, a sort of framework consisting of four tripods of the same whitish metal, issued or unfolded from the sphere and served to support it when it came to rest. In this position, the lower part of the globe was no more than fifteen or twenty feet from the ground. A circular trap or man-hole opened in the bottom, and from this a stairway of metal steps was let down to earth. Seven creatures of an unearthly type descended the stairs forthwith and proceeded to examine their environment with all the air of a party of investigating scientists. They

were perhaps four feet in height, with globular bodies; and they possessed three short legs and four extremely supple and jointless arms that issued from the side and back of smaller globes that were presumably their heads. These arms were all long enough to reach the earth, and were used to a certain extent in locomotion and the maintenance of equilibrium. The creatures were either equipped with natural coverings like the shards of insects or else they wore some kind of armor or suiting made of red and green metals, for they glittered gorgeously in the sunlight. The orange-grove seemed to interest them greatly, for they broke off several boughs laden with ripe fruit and one of their number forthwith carried the boughs into the sphere, holding them aloft with two of his odd arms. The other six roamed about the country-side and vanished from view for awhile, returning in less than an hour with numerous plant specimens and also with pieces of furniture, human clothing, and tin cans, which they must have collected from the buildings on some deserted plantation. They re-entered the sphere, the metal stairway was drawn up, the trap was closed, and the great orb retracted its four tripods and flew away toward the ocean at an increased rate of speed that would soon bring it to the Bahama Islands. The orange-grower and his son, who had hid themselves behind a pile of empty lug-boxes and had scarcely dared to move for fear of attracting the Venusians' attention, now hurried to the local radio station, where the operator was still on duty, and sent a detailed report of what they had seen to the Antarctic laboratories.

A little later, the sphere was sighted from the Bahamas, but apparently it did not pause on any of these islands. Still later it was observed from Haiti, San Domingo, Martinique and the Barbadoes. Then it landed near Cayenne, where natives were captured by the Venusians and taken aboard the sphere. Then the thing continued its south-easterly flight and was seen far out at sea

from Pernambuco. An hour afterward it was sighted from St. Helena, and then it changed its course and flew directly south. It passed above Tristan de Cunha and disappeared from human observation for two days. Then a biplane, flying from the Sandwich Islands to the Antarctic, found the great orb floating in the sea, and reported this fact to the united scientists. It was at once surmised that the occupants had fallen ill and were perhaps dead, or at least were no longer able to operate the propulsive and levitative mechanism.

“Immediate contact with our soil and atmosphere,” said Lapham, “has no doubt proved as dangerous to these beings as our own excursions into terrains formed after a Venusian pattern were dangerous to us. Probably they were a group of scientists who desired to gather data regarding terrestrial conditions, and were willing to chance the bodily peril.”

Great excitement prevailed at the news of this find, and three armored planes with heavy guns and a supply of explosives were sent to watch the floating sphere. The huge orb was half-submerged in the water; and no sign of life, no movement other than that of natural drifting, was detectible. At length, after some hesitation, the crew of the planes decided to fire a seven-inch shell at the exposed portion, even at the risk of shattering machinery that might prove of intense interest and value to humanity. To the surprise of everyone, the shell made no impression on the sphere, beyond denting its side a little and increasing the speed of its drift along the waters. Finally it was resolved to tow the thing to land. On being approached, it revealed a number of small circular and oval windows, filled with semi-translucent materials of green, amber and violet. It was beached on one of the South Shetland Islands. After vain attempts with milder explosives, the trap in the bottom was blasted open with thorite, a terrible new compound of solidified gases, with which whole mountains had been shattered. Evidently, the metal

of the sphere was stronger and harder than any substance found or invented by human beings, and it was likewise ascertained to be heavier.

When the fumes of the explosion had cleared away, several scientists entered the sphere by means of a ladder. Much damage had been done by the thorite, and certain highly intricate mechanisms around the trap were hopelessly mined, to the extreme regret of the investigators. But the body of the sphere, and its contents, were still intact. The interior was divided into a great number of curious compartments with octagonal walls, and had probably accommodated more than a thousand of the interplanetary voyagers on its trip to the earth. A large room above the trap opened off into three others of equally capacious extent, filled with machinery whose use and method of operation could not easily be determined. In the center of each room there stood an enormous contrivance made of about fifty metal cubes all joined together by means of heavy quadrangular rods. These rods, in turn, were all correlated by single-stranded wires of varying thickness, forming a huge net. Three different metals, all unfamiliar, were noted in the composition of the cubes, rods and wires in the different rooms. From each of the central engineering there issued great curving tubes that ramified into scores of smaller tubes arching the roof of the room in all directions and terminating in series of no less than ten key-boards with many square and sphere-like knobs that were placed in a sort of elaborate rotation. The key-boards were attached to the walls. Before each of the circular windows, a device resembling a gigantic trumpet, with a hundred-angled lens of some glass-like material in its mouth, upreared from a tube that ran directly to the core of the cube-contrivance. The windows in each room were of a different color; and none of them, as well as none of the other windows in the sphere, was clearly permeable to human vision. On the outside of the sphere, opposite the large apartments, were found three disks that had a vague

likeness to radio transmitters. All three were connected with the interior mechanism. It was imagined that these mechanisms were the source of the various rays employed in molecular dissolution and re-construction.

Also it was thought that the machinery wrecked by the thorite had served to propel and levitate the sphere.

After examining the apparatus in the large rooms, the scientist began an investigation of the smaller apartments, most of which had evidently been used as living-quarters. The beds and furniture were truly strange. The former were round, shallow tubs, lined with down-like materials of incredible resiliency, in which the globe-like bodies of the invaders had reposed, with their arms depending over the sides or coiled close to their trunks. There were eating-rooms where, in metal troughs divided into bowl-like compartments, were the remains of bizarre and unidentifiable foods. The ceilings of the rooms were all low, in proportion to the stature of their inmates, and the investigators were often compelled to stoop. Mechanical resource and even luxury were manifest on every hand, and there were many special devices, of unknown use and operation, that had probably ministered to the comfort of these odd beings.

After a number of rooms had been explored, a terrific stench was perceived, emanating through an open door: The bodies of six Venusians were found lying together where they had died, on the floor of what appeared to be a kind of laboratory. The place was filled with test-tubes of unfamiliar forms and materials and with all manner of scientific apparatus that aroused the interest and envy of the terrene investigators. The Venusians, when stricken, had manifestly been engaged in dissecting the body of one of the natives captured in Guiana, which was stretched and tied down on an operating table. They had flayed the dead Indian from head to foot and had laid open his entire viscera. The corpse of his companion was

never found; but the contents of a number of tubes, on analysis, were discovered to represent the sundry chemical elements of which the human body is composed. Other tubes contained in solution, the elements of oranges and of other terrestrial fruits and plant-forms.

The dead Venusians were no longer clothed in the gorgeous green and red shards that the Florida planter had reported them as wearing. They were quite naked, with bodies and limbs of a dark-gray color. Their skin was without any sign of hair and was divided into rudimentary scales or plates, suggesting that they had evolved from a reptilian ancestor of some unearthly type. But nothing else in their anatomy was denotive of the reptile, or, indeed, of any terrene mammalian form. Their long, curving arms and round bodies with neckless, globular heads offered a vague hint of enormous tarantulas. The heads were equipped with two small, sucker-like mouths protruding from the lower part, and were without anything that suggested aural or nasal organs. They had a series of short, retractile appendages, arranged at regular intervals about their whole circumference above the beginning of the four arms. In the end of each appendage was an eye-ball with many crystal-like facets, and every eye-ball was of a different color and possessed a different formation and disposition of facets.

On re-examining the mass of wrecked machinery, the seventh Venusian was found. His body had been blown into fragments and buried under a heap of twisted tubes and wires and disks. Apparently, when stricken down by the same illness as the others, he had been guiding the course of the great orb, and, perhaps in falling or in the throes of his culminative agony, had stopped the working of the propulsive mechanism. It was learned that all the Venusians had been slain by certain streptococci, comparatively harmless to human beings, with which they had been infected through contact with the dead Indians.

The finding and opening of the sphere created supreme interest and even aroused much hope among the united scientists. It was felt that if the principle of the disintegrative and reconstructive rays could be ascertained, much might be done to reconquer earth, or, at least, to stem the Venusian encroachments. But the three mechanisms of cubes, tubes and wires, and their manifold key-boards, baffled all ingenuity and all the mechanical science of the investigators for a long while. In the meantime, all those who had entered the sphere were smitten with unearthly diseases, and many died or were incapacitated for the remainder of their lives. VII Weeks and months went by and lengthened somehow into a year. The metamorphosis of earth had gone slowly on, though after a term of three months no more of the deadly satellites had appeared from outer space. Lapham and others conjectured that perhaps the invasion from Venus had been undertaken with the sole idea of relieving a problem of over-population and had ceased with the solving of this problem. More than two hundred of the metal spheres had fallen under observation; and allowing only a thousand occupants for each, it was estimated that at least two hundred thousand of the hostile foreign entities had taken up their abode on earth. After partially converting all the continents, many of the spheres, as Lapham had predicted, were now attacking the seas, and immense storms of vapor were reported daily from the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. Even in the polar realms, the inevitable climatic and atmospheric changes were being felt. The air was already warmer and moister, and deleterious elements were invading it at the same time, causing a gradual increase of pulmonary maladies among the survivors of the human race.

However, in spite of all this, the situation had begun to present a few hopeful factors. Invention, beneath the spur of dread necessity, had made new progress, and some valuable scientific discoveries had occurred.

Machinery for the direct utilization and conservation of solar energy on a large scale had been perfected, and gigantic refractors had been devised, by which the heat of the sun could be magnified and concentrated. With these refractors, large areas of eternal ice and snow were melted away, revealing a rich soil that was now utilized for agriculture and horticulture. With the resultant amelioration of living-conditions, humanity proceeded to entrench itself firmly and with a fair degree of comfort, in regions that had once been deemed altogether uninhabitable.

Another valuable invention was a televisual instrument of range and power beyond anything hitherto devised, by which, without the aid of a transmitting-apparatus, sight-images could be picked up at any terrene distance. The use of a well-known ray in connection with this invention, made it possible to penetrate the vaporous air that enshrouded the new terrains, and to watch the habits, movements and daily life of the invaders. In this way, much astounding knowledge was soon acquired concerning them. It was found that they had built many cities, of a peculiar squat type of architecture, in which some of the buildings were septangular and octagonal and others were cylinder-like or spherical in form. The cities were wrought of synthetic minerals and metals, and all the houses were connected by tubes which were employed for purposes of traffic. Passengers, or any desired article, could be shot through them to a given point in a few instants. The buildings were illumined with lamps made of radio-active materials. The Venusians had also begun the growing of ultra-terrestrial fruits and vegetables and the breeding of certain creatures that were more like gigantic insects than animals. The vegetables were mainly fungoid, were of prodigious size and complicated structure, and many of them were grown in artificial caverns beneath the stimulation of green and amber rays produced from orb-like mechanisms.

The habits and customs of the Venusians differed, as might be imagined, from those of human beings. It was learned that they required very little sleep, two or three hours being enough for the majority of them. Also, they did not eat more than once in four days. After their meals, they were very torpid for half a day and did not engage in much activity. This, in the eyes of many scientists, gave support to the theory that they had evolved from a reptilian form. They were bi-sexual; and, in further support of the above theory, their young were hatched from eggs. Apart from the vegetables aforementioned, their foods consisted of a great number of substances formed through chemical processes of a recondite order. They had a sort of pictorial art, of a geometric type resembling cubism, and a written literature that seemed to be concerned mainly with scientific and mathematical problems. It could not be found that any religious customs or rites were observed among them; and their trend of mind was predominantly scientific and mechanical. They had evolved a purely materialistic civilization and had carried it to a point far beyond that of the earth-peoples. Their knowledge of chemistry, physics, mathematics and all other branches of science, was so profound that it seemed well-nigh supernatural. The sundry instruments, tools and engines that they employed were a source of perpetual marvel to human inventors. There were optical instruments with a series of revolving lenses arranged above each other in metal frames, by means of which they apparently studied the heavens, in spite of the cloudy pall that hung forever upon their dominions. It was thought, however, that perhaps their myriad-faceted eyes were more or less televisual and could penetrate many materials impervious to human sight. In support of this theory, the semi-opaque windows of the fallen sphere were recalled.

That which evoked the keenest interest, was the type of mechanism they had invented for the amplification of all sorts of cosmic rays, of solar light

itself and even the most delicate and imperceptible emanations in the spectrum of remote stars. By a process of repercussion and concentration, such rays were compelled to afford power beyond that of steam or electricity. The magnified vibrations were employed in the breaking-up of atoms and in their re-construction. The breaking-up, it was soon learned, could be done in more than one way, according to the intensity of the vibration used.

By means of the higher vibrations, a terrific explosion could be caused in destroying one or two molecules and reducing them to their ultimate electrons. But the milder vibrations caused a more slow and incomplete explosion, in which the atom-formation was partially destroyed. This latter process was the one that had been used as a preliminary to the transformation of the world. Smaller mechanisms of a kind similar to those in the silver globe were in common use among the invaders, and all their air-vehicles, industrial machinery and various other appliances were run with power derived from the explosion of atoms by amplified cosmic rays. By watching the actual employment of these mechanisms, human scientists learned how the machinery in the derelict sphere had been operated. Also, the changing colors of the satellites were explained, for it was perceived that the generation of the various rays was accompanied by the production of an aura of color about the transmitting mechanism. As Lapham had surmised, yellow was the tone of destruction, blue the tint of mineral evolution, and red the hue of vegetable growth.

The invisibility of the two first spheres for a long period, was like wise explained, when it was learned that the Venusians could use at will, in connection with the other vibrations, a vibration that neutralized these customary colors. Probably, through motives of natural caution, they had

wished to remain invisible, till observation had convinced them that nothing was to be feared from the world they were attacking.

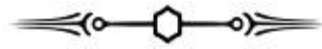
Now, with the knowledge acquired from their monstrous foes, human inventors were able to create similar machinery for destroying atoms and for re-constructing them in any desired pattern. Enormous planes were built and were fitted with this machinery, and a war of titanic destruction soon began. The Venusian territories of Australia were attacked by a fleet of four hundred planes, which succeeded in annihilating several of the metal spheres, as well as two cities of the enemy, and turned many hundred miles of vapor-covered land into a seething chaos of primeval dust. The invaders were totally unprepared, for evidently they had despised their human enemies and had not thought it worth while to watch their movements and activities at any time. Before they could rally, the planes had passed on to the shores of Asia, and had inflicted much damage in the Mesopotamian terrain.

At the present time, after twenty years of a warfare more stupendous than anything in human history, a fair amount of territory has been regained, in spite of terrible reprisals on the part of the Venusians. But the issue is still in doubt, and may not be decided for hundreds of years to come. The invaders are well-entrenched, and if re-enforcement should ever arrive from Venus, the tide may turn against humanity. The real hope lies in their limited number, and in the fact that they are not thriving physically in their new environment and are slowly becoming sterile as well as subject to a multitude of maladies, due, doubtless, to the incomplete conversion of the earth and its atmosphere and the tendency of tellurian atom-structures to re-establish themselves, even apart from the re-integration carried on by scientists. On the other hand, the vitiation of our seas and air by the introduction of deadly gases is not favorable to human life, and the powers

of medical science are not yet able to cope fully with the unusual problems offered.

Roger Lapham, whose clear, logical brain and prophetic insight have always been a source of inspiration to his fellows, has died lately and is mourned by all. But his spirit still prevails; and even if humanity should lose in the long and catastrophic warfare with an alien foe, the tale of mortal existence and toil and suffering will not have been told in vain.

Phoenix



RODIS AND HILAR had climbed from their natal caverns to the top chamber of the high observatory tower. Pressed close together, for warmth as well as love, they stood at an eastern window looking forth on hills and valleys dim with perennial starlight. They had come up to watch the rising of the sun: that sun which they had never seen except as an orb of blackness, occluding the zodiacal stars in its course from horizon to horizon.

Thus their ancestors had seen it for millennia. By some freak of cosmic law, unforeseen, and inexplicable to astronomers and physicists, the sun's cooling had been comparatively sudden, and the earth had not suffered the long-drawn complete desiccation of such planets as Mercury and Mars. Rivers, lakes, seas, had frozen solid; and the air itself had congealed, all in a term of years historic rather than geologic. Millions of the earth's inhabitants had perished, trapped by the glacial ice, the centigrade cold. The rest, armed with all the resources of science, had found time to entrench themselves against the cosmic night in a world of ramified caverns, dug by atomic excavators far below the surface.

Here, by the light of artificial orbs, and the heat drawn from the planet's still-molten depths, life went on much as it had done in the outer world. Trees, fruits, grasses, grains, vegetables, were grown in isotope-stimulated soil or hydoroponic gardens, affording food, renewing a breathable atmosphere. Domestic animals were kept; and birds flew; and insects crawled or fluttered. The rays considered necessary for life and health were afforded by the sunbright lamps that shone eternally in all the caverns.

Little of the old science was lost; but, on the other hand, there was now little advance. Existence had become the conserving of a fire menaced by inexorable night. Generation by generation a mysterious sterility had lessened the numbers of the race from millions to a few thousands. As time went on, a similar sterility began to affect animals; and even plants no longer flourished with their first abundance. No biologist could determine the cause with certainty.

Perhaps man, as well as other terrestrial life-forms, was past his crime, and had begun to undergo collectively the inevitable senility that comes to the individual. Or perhaps, having been a surface-dweller throughout most of his evolution, he was inadaptably to the cribbed and prisoned life, the cavered light and air; and was dying slowly from the deprivation of things he had almost forgotten.

Indeed, the world that had once flourished beneath a living sun was little more than a legend now, a tradition preserved by art and literature and history. Its heeding Babelian cities, its fecund hills and plains, were swathed impenetrably in snow and ice and solidified air. No living man and gazed upon it, except from the night-bound towers maintained as observatories.

Still, however, the dreams of men were often lit by primordial memories, in which the sun shone on rippling waters and waving trees and grass. And their waking hours were sometimes touched by an undying nostalgia for the lost earth...

Alarmed by the prospect of racial extinction, the most able and brilliant savants had conceived a project that was seemingly no less desperate than fantastic. The plan, if executed, might lead to failure or even the planet's destruction. But all the necessary steps had now been taken toward its launching.

It was of this plan that Rodis and Hilar spoke, standing clasped in each other's arms, as they waited for the rising of the dead sun.

"And you must go?" said Rodis, with averted eyes and voice that quavered a little.

"Of course. It is a duty and an honor. I am regarded as the foremost of the younger atomicists. The actual placing and timing of the bombs will devolve largely upon me."

"But — are you sure of success? There are so many risks, Hilar." The girl shuddered, clasping her lover with convulsive tightness.

"We are not sure of anything," Hilar admitted. "But, granting that our calculations are correct, the multiple charges of fissionable materials including more than half the solar elements, should start chain-reactions that will restore the sun to its former incandescence. Of course, the explosion may be too sudden and too violent, involving the nearer planets in the formation of a nova. But we do not believe that this will happen — since an explosion of such magnitude would require instant disruption of all the sun's elements. Such disruption should not occur without a starter for each separate atomic structure. Science has never been able to break down all the known elements. If it had been, the earth itself would undoubtedly have suffered destruction in the old atomic wars."

Hilar paused, and his eyes dilated, kindling with a visionary fire.

"How glorious," he went on, "to use for a purpose of cosmic renovation the deadly projectiles designed by our forefathers only to blast and destroy. Stored in sealed caverns, they have not been used since man abandoned the earth's surface so many millenniums ago. Nor have the old spaceships been used either... An interstellar drive was never perfected; and our voyages were always limited to the other worlds of our own system — none of which was inhabited, or inhabitable. Since the sun's cooling and darkening,

there has been no object in visiting any of them. But the ships too were stored away. And the newest and speediest one, powered with anti-gravity magnets, has been made ready for our voyage to the sun.”

Rodis listened silently, with an awe that seemed to have subdued her misgivings, while Hilar continued to speak of the tremendous project upon which he, with six other chosen technicians, was about to embark. In the meanwhile, the black sun rose slowly into heavens thronged with the cold ironic blazing of innumerable stars, among which no planet shone. It blotted out the sting of the Scorpion, poised at that hour above the eastern hills. It was smaller but nearer than the igneous orb of history and legend. In its center, like a Cyclopean eye, there burned a single spot of dusky red fire, believed to mark the eruption of some immense volcano amid the measureless and cinder-blackened landscape.

To one standing in the ice-bound valley below the observatory, it would have seemed that the tower’s litten window was a yellow eye that stared back from the dead earth to that crimson eye of the dead sun.

“Soon,” said Hilar, “you will climb to this chamber — and see the morning that none has seen for a century of centuries. The thick ice will thaw from the peaks and valleys, running in streams to remolten lakes and oceans. The liquefied air will rise in clouds and vapors, touched with the spectrum-tinted splendor of the light. Again, across earth, will blow the winds of the four quarters; and grass and flowers will grow, and trees burgeon from tiny saplings. And man, the dweller in closed caves and abysses, will return to his proper heritage.”

“How wonderful it all sounds,” murmured Rodis. “But... you will come back to me?”

“I will come back to you... in the sunlight,” said Hilar. The space-vessel *Phosphor* lay in a huge cavern beneath that region which had once been

known as the Atlas Mountains. The cavern's mile-thick roof had been partly blasted away by atomic disintegrators. A great circular shaft slanted upward to the surface, forming a mouth in the mountain-side through which the stars of the Zodiac were visible. The prow of the *Phosphor* pointed at the stars.

All was now ready for its launching. A score of dignitaries and savants, looking like strange ungainly monsters in suits and helmets worn against the spatial cold that had invaded the cavern, were present for the occasion. Hilar and his six companions had already gone aboard the *Phosphor* and had closed its air-locks.

Inscrutable and silent behind their metalloid helmets, the watchers waited. There was no ceremony, no speaking or waving of farewells; nothing to indicate that a world's destiny impended on the mission of the vessel.

Like mouths of fire-belching dragons the stern-rockets flared, and the *Phosphor*, like a wingless bird, soared upward through the great shaft and vanished. Hilar, gazing through a rear port, saw for a few moments the lamp-bright window of that tower in which he had stood so recently with Rodis. The window was a golden spark that swirled downward in abysses of devouring night — and was extinguished. Behind it, he knew, his beloved stood watching the *Phosphor's* departure. It was a symbol, he mused... a symbol of life, of memory... of the suns themselves... of all things that flash briefly and fall into oblivion.

But such thoughts, he felt, should be dismissed. They were unworthy of one whom his fellows had appointed as a light-bringer, a Prometheus who should rekindle the dead sun and re-lumine the dark world. There were no days, only hours of eternal starlight, to measure the time in which they sped outward through the void. The rockets, used for initial propulsion, no longer

flamed astern; and the vessel flew in darkness, except for the gleaming Argus eyes of its ports, drawn now by the mighty gravitational drag of the blind sun. Test-flights had been considered unnecessary for the *Phosphor*. All its machinery was in perfect condition; and the mechanics involved were simple and easily mastered. None of its crew had ever been in extraterrestrial space before; but all were well-trained in astronomy, mathematics, and the various techniques essential to a voyage between worlds. There were two navigators; one rocket-engineer; and two engineers who would operate the powerful generators, charged with a negative magnetism reverse to that of gravity, with which they hoped to approach, circumnavigate, and eventually depart in safety from an orb enormously heavier than the system's nine planets merged into one. Hilar and his assistant, Han Joas, completed the personnel. Their sole task was the timing, landing, and distribution of the bombs.

All were descendants of a mixed race with Latin, Semitic, Hamitic, and negroid ancestry: a race that had dwelt, before the sun's cooling, in countries south of the Mediterranean, where the former deserts had been rendered fertile by a vast irrigation-system of lakes and canals.

This mixture, after so many centuries of cavern life, had produced a characteristically slender, well-knit type, of short or medium stature and pale olive complexion. The features were often of negroid softness, the general physique was marked by a delicacy verging upon decadence.

To an extent surprising, in view of the vast intermediate eras of historic and geographic change, this people had preserved many preatomic traditions and even something of the old classic Mediterranean cultures. Their language bore distinct traces of Latin, Greek, Spanish and Arabic.

Remnants of other peoples, those of sub-equatorial Asia and America, had survived the universal glaciation by burrowing underground. Radio

communication had been maintained with these peoples till within fairly recent times, and had then ceased. It was believed that they had died out, or had retrograded into savagery, losing the civilization to which they had once attained.

Hour after hour, intervalled only by sleep and eating, the *Phosphor* sped onward through the black unvarying void. To Hilar, it seemed at times that they flew merely through a darker and vaster cavern whose remote walls were spangled by the stars as if by radiant orbs. He had thought to feel the overwhelming vertigo of unbottomed and undirectioned space. Instead, there was a weird sense of circumscription by the ambient night and emptiness, together with a sense of cyclic repetition, as if all that was happening had happened many times before and must recur often through endless future kalpas.

Had he and his companions gone forth in former cycles to the relighting of former perished suns? Would they go forth again, to rekindle suns that would flame and die in some posterior universe? Had there always been, would there always be, a Rodis who awaited his return? Of these thoughts he spoke only to Han Joas, who shared something of his innate mysticism and his trend toward cosmic speculation. But mostly the two talked of the mysteries of the atom and its typhonic powers, and discussed the problems with which they would shortly be confronted.

The ship carried several hundred disruption bombs, many of untried potency: the unused heritage of ancient wars that had left chasm scars and lethal radioactive areas, some a thousand miles or more in extent, for the planetary glaciers to cover. There were bombs of iron, calcium, sodium, helium, hydrogen, sulphur, potassium, magnesium, copper, chromium, strontium, barium, zinc: elements that had all been anciently revealed in the solar spectrum. Even at the apex of their madness, the warring nations

had wisely refrained from employing more than a few such bombs at any one time. Chain-reactions had sometimes been started; but, fortunately, had died out. Hilar and Han Joas hoped to distribute the bombs at intervals over the sun's entire circumference; preferably in large deposits of the same elements as those of which they were composed. The vessel was equipped with radar apparatus by which the various elements could be detected and located. The bombs would be timed to explode with as much simultaneity as possible. If all went well, the *Phosphor* would have fulfilled its mission and traveled most of the return distance to earth before the explosions occurred.

It had been conjectured that the sun's interior was composed of still-molten magma, covered by a relatively thin crust: a seething flux of matter that manifested itself in volcanic activities. Only one of the volcanoes was visible from earth to the naked eye; but numerous others had been revealed to telescopic study. Now, as the *Phosphor* drew near to its destination, the others flamed out on the huge, slowly rotating orb that had darkened a fourth of the ecliptic and had blotted Libra, Scorpio and Sagittarius wholly from view.

For a long time it had seemed to hang above the voyagers. Now, suddenly, as if through some prodigious legerdemain, it lay beneath them: a monstrous, ever-broadening disk of ebon, eyed with fiery craters, veined and spotted and blotched with unknown pallid radioactives. It was like the buckler of some macrosomic giant of the night, who had entrenched himself in the abyss lying between the worlds.

The *Phosphor* plunged toward it like a steel splinter drawn by some tremendous lodestone.

Each member of the crew had been trained before-hand for the part he was to play; and everything had been timed with the utmost precision.

Sybal and Samac, the engineers of the anti-gravity magnets, began to manipulate the switches that would build up resistance to the solar drag. The generators, bulking to the height of three men, with induction-coils that suggested some colossal Laocoon, could draw from cosmic space a negative force capable of counteracting many earth-gravities. In past ages they had defied easily the pull of Jupiter; and the ship had even coasted as near to the blazing sun as its insulation and refrigeration systems would safely permit. Therefore it seemed reasonable to expect that the voyagers could accomplish their purpose of approaching closely to the darkened globe, of circling it, and pulling away when the disruption-charges had all been planted.

A dull, subsonic vibration, felt rather than heard, began to emanate from the magnets. It shook the vessel, ached in the voyagers' tissues. Intently, with anxiety unbetrayed by their impassive features, they watched the slow, gradual building-up of power shown by gauge-dials on which giant needles crept like horologic hands, registering the reversed gravities one after one, till a drag equivalent to that of fifteen Earths had been neutralized. The clamp of the solar gravitation, drawing them on with projectile-like velocity, crushing them to their seats with relentless increase of weight, was loosened. The needles crept on... more slowly now... to sixteen... to seventeen... and stopped. The *Phosphor's* fall had been retarded but not arrested. And the switches stood at their last notch.

Sybal spoke, in answer to the unuttered questions of his companions. "Something is wrong. Perhaps there has been some unforeseen deterioration of the coils, in whose composition strange and complex alloy were used. Some of the elements may have been unstable — or have developed instability through age. Or perhaps there is some interfering force, born of

the sun's decay. At any rate, it is impossible to build more power toward the twenty-seven antigravities we will require close to the solar surface."

Samac added: "The decelerative jets will increase our resistance to nineteen anti-gravities. It will still be far from enough, even at our present distance."

"How much time have we?" inquired Hilar, turning to the navigators, Calaf and Caramod.

The two conferred and calculated.

"By using the decelerative jets, it will be two hours before we reach the sun," announced Calaf finally.

As if his announcement had been an order, Eibano, the jet-engineer, promptly jerked the levers that fired to full power the reversing rockets banked in the *Phosphor's* nose and sides. There was a slight further deceleration of their descent, a further lightening of the grievous weight that oppressed them. But the *Phosphor* still plunged irreversibly sun-ward.

Hilar and Han Joas exchanged a glance of understanding and agreement. They rose stiffly from their seats, and moved heavily toward the magazine, occupying fully half the ship's interior, in which the hundreds of disruption-bombs were racked. It was unnecessary to announce their purpose; and no one spoke either in approval or demur.

Hilar opened the magazine's door; and he and Han Joas paused on the threshold, looking back. They saw for the last time the faces of their fellow-voyagers, expressing no other emotion than resignation, vignetted, as it were, on the verge of destruction. Then they entered the magazine, closing its door behind them.

They set to work methodically, moving back to back along a narrow aisle between the racks in which the immense ovoid bombs were piled in strict order according to their respective elements. Because of various

coördinated dials and switches involved, it was a matter of minutes to prepare a single bomb for the explosion. Therefore Hilar and Han Joas, in the time at their disposal, could do no more than set the timing and detonating mechanism of one bomb of each element. A great chronometer, ticking at the magazine's farther end, enabled them to accomplish this task with precision. The bombs were thus timed to explode simultaneously, detonating the others through chain-reaction, at the moment when the *Phosphor* should touch the sun's surface.

The solar pull, strengthening as the *Phosphor* fell to its doom, had now made their movements slow and difficult. It would, they feared, immobilize them before they could finish preparing a second series of bombs for detonation. Laboriously, beneath the burden of a weight already trebled, they made their way to seats that faced a reflector in which the external cosmos was imaged.

It was an awesome and stupendous scene on which they gazed. The sun's globe had broadened vastly, filling the nether heavens. Half-seen, a dim unhorizoned landscape, fitfully lit by the crimson far-sundered flares of volcanoes, by bluish zones and patches of strange radio-active minerals, it deepened beneath them abysmally disclosing mountains that would have made the Himalayas seem like hillocks, revealing chasms that might have engulfed asteroids and planets.

At the center of this Cyclopean landscape burned the great volcano that had been called Hephaestus by astronomers. It was the same volcano watched by Hilar and Rodis from the observatory window. Tongues of flame a hundred miles in length arose and licked skyward from a crater that seemed the mouth of some ultramundane hell.

Hilar and Han Joas no longer heard the chronometer's portentous ticking, and had no eyes for the watching of its ominous hands. Such

watching was needless now: there was nothing more to be done, and nothing before them but eternity. They measured their descent by the broadening of the dim solar plain, the leaping into salience of new mountains, the deepening of new chasms and gulfs in the globe that had now lost all semblance of a sphere.

It was plain now that the *Phosphor* would fall directly into the flaming and yawning crater of Hephaestus. Faster and faster it plunged, heavier grew the piled chains of gravity that giants could not have lifted...

At the very last, the reflector of which Hilar and Han Joas peered was filled entirely by the tongued volcanic fires that enveloped the *Phosphor*.

Then, without eyes to see or ears to apprehend, they were part of the pyre from which the sun, like a Phoenix, was reborn.

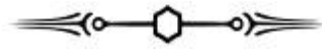
Rodis, climbing to the tower, after a period of fitful sleep and troublous dreams, saw from its window the rising of the rekindled orb.

It dazzled her, though its glory was half-dimmed by rainbow-colored mists that fumed from the icy mountain-tops. It was a sight filled with marvel and with portent. Thin rills of downward-threading water had already begun to fret the glacial armor on slopes and scarps; and later they would swell to cataracts, laying bare the buried soil and stone. Vapors, that seemed to flow and fluctuate on renascent winds, swam sun-ward from lakes of congealed air at the valley's bottom. It was a visible resumption of the elemental life and activity so long suspended in hibernal night. Even through the tower's insulating walls, Rodis felt the solar warmth that later would awaken the seeds and spores of plants that had lain dormant for cycles.

Her heart was stirred to wonder by the spectacle. But beneath the wonder was a great numbness and a sadness like unmelting ice. Hilar, she knew, would never return to her — except as a ray of the light, a spark of the vital

heat, that he had helped to relumine. For the nonce, there was irony rather than comfort in the memory of his promise: “I will come back to you — in the sunlight.”

The Necromantic Tale



IN ONE SENSE, it is a mere truism to speak of the evocative power of words. The olden efficacy of subtly woven spells, of magic formulas and incantations, has long become a literary metaphor; though the terrible reality which once underlay and may still underlie such concepts has been forgotten. However, the necromancy of language is more than a metaphor to Sir Roderick Hagdon: the scars of fire on his ankles are things which no one could possibly regard as having their origin in a figure of speech.

Sir Roderick Hagdon came to his title and his estate with no definite expectation of inheriting them, nor any first-hand knowledge of the sort of life and surroundings entailed by his inheritance. He had been born in Australia; and though he had known that his father was the younger brother of Sir John Hagdon, he had formed only the vaguest idea of the ancestral manor; and the interest that he felt therein was even vaguer. His surprise was little short of consternation when the deaths of his father, of Sir John Hagdon and Sir John's only son, all occurring within less than a year, left clear his own succession and brought a letter from the family lawyers informing him of this fact — which otherwise might have escaped his attention. His mother, too, was dead; and he was unmarried; so, leaving the Australian sheep-range in charge of a competent overseer, he had sailed immediately for England to assume his hereditary privileges.

It was a strange experience for him; and, strangest of all, in view of the fact that he had never before visited England, was the inexplicable feeling of familiarity aroused by his first sight of the Hagdon manor. He seemed to know the farm-lands, the cottages of the tenants, the wood of ancient oaks

with their burdens of Druidic mistletoe, and the old manor-house half hidden among gigantic yews, as if he had seen them all in some period that was past recollection. Being of an analytic trend, he attributed all this to that imperfect simultaneousness in the action of the brain-hemispheres by which psychologists account for such phenomena. But the feeling remained and grew upon him; and he yielded more and more to its half-sinister charm, as he explored his property and delved in the family archives. He felt also an unexpected kinship with his ancestors — a feeling which had lain wholly dormant during his Australian youth. Their portraits, peering upon him from the never-dissipated shadows of the long hall wherein they hung, were like well-known faces.

The manor-house, it was said, had been built in the reign of Henry the Seventh. It was mossed and lichened with antiquity; and there was a hint of beginning dilapidation in the time-worn stone of the walls. The formal garden had gone a little wild from neglect; the trimmed hedges and trees had taken on fantastic sprawling shapes; and evil, poisonous weeds had invaded the flower-beds. There were statues of cracked marble and verdigris-eaten bronze amid the shrubbery; there were fountains that had long ceased to flow; and dials on which the foliage-intercepted sun no longer fell. About it all there hung an air of shadow-laden time and subtle decadence. But though he had never known anything but the primitive Australian environment, Hagdon found himself quite at home in this atmosphere of Old World complexities — an atmosphere that was made from the dissolving phantoms of a thousand years, from the breathings of dead men and women, from loves and hates that had gone down to dust. Contrary to his anticipations, he felt no nostalgia whatever for the remote land of his birth and upbringing.

Sir Roderick came to love the sunless gardens and the overtowering yews. But, above and beyond these, he was fascinated by the manor-house itself, by the hall of ancestral portraits and the dark, dusty library in which he found an amazing medley of rare tomes and manuscripts. There were many first editions of Elizabethan poets and dramatists; and mingled with these in a quaint disorder, were antique books on astrology and conjuration, on demonism and magic. Sir Rodereck shivered a little, he knew not why, as he turned the leaves of some of these latter, volumes, from whose ancient vellum and parchment arose to his nostrils an odor that was like the mustiness of tombs. He dosed them hastily; and the first editions were unable to detain him; but he lingered long over certain genealogies and manuscript records of the Hagdon family filled with a strange eagerness to learn as much as he could concerning these shadowy forbears of his.

In going through the records, he was struck by the brevity of the mention accorded to a former Sir Roderick Hagdon, who had lived in the early Seventeenth Century. All other members of the direct line had been dealt with at some length; their deeds, their marriages, and their various claims to distinction (often in the role of soldiers or scholars) were usually set forth with a well-nigh vainglorious unction. But concerning Sir Roderick, nothing more was given than the bare dates of his birth and death, and the fact that he was the father of one Sir Ralph Hagdon. No mention whatever was made of his wife.

Though there was no obvious reason for more than a passing surmise, the present Sir Roderick wondered and speculated much over these singular and perhaps sinister omissions. His curiosity increased when he found that there was no portrait of Sir Roderick in the gallery, and none of his mysterious unnamed lady. There was not even a vacant place between the pictures of Sir Roderick's father and son, to indicate that there ever had

been a portrait. The new baronet determined to solve the mystery, if possible: an element of vague but imperative disquietude was now mingled with his curiosity. He could not have analyzed his feelings; but the life and fate of this unknown ancestor seemed to take on for him a special significance, a concern that was incomprehensibly personal and intimate.

At times he felt that his obsession with this problem was utterly ridiculous and uncalled-for. Nevertheless, he ransacked the manor-house in the hope of finding some hidden record; and he questioned the servants, the tenants and the people of the parish to learn if there were any legendry concerning his namesake. The manor-house yielded nothing more to his search; and his inquiries met with blank faces and avowals of ignorance: no one seemed to have heard of this elusive Seventeenth Century baronet.

At last, from the family butler, James Wharton, an octogenarian who had served three generations of Hagdons, Sir Roderick obtained the clue which he sought. Wharton, who was now on the brink of senility, and had grown forgetful and taciturn, was seemingly ignorant as the rest; but one day, after repeated questioning, he remembered that he had been told in his youth of a secret closet behind one of the book-shelves; in which certain manuscripts and heirlooms had been locked away several hundred years before; and which, for some unknown reason, no Hagdon had ever opened since that time. Here, he suggested, something might be found that would serve to illumine the dark gap in the family history. There was a cunning, sardonic gleam in his rheumy eyes as he came forth with this tardy piece of information, and Sir Roderick wondered if the old man were not possessed of more genealogical lore than he was willing to admit. All at once, he conceived the disquieting idea that perhaps he was on the verge of some abominable discovery, on the threshold of things that had been forgotten because they were too dreadful for remembrance.

However, he did not hesitate: he was conscious of a veritable compulsion to learn whatever could be learned. The bookcase indicated built the half-senile butler was one which contained most of the volumes of demonism and magic. It was now removed; and Sir Roderick went over the uncovered wall inch by inch. After much futile fumbling, he located and pressed a hidden spring, and the door of the sealed room swung Open.

It was little more than a cupboard, though a man could have concealed himself within it in time of need. Doubtless it had been built primarily for some such purpose. From out its narrow gloom the moldiness of dead ages rushed upon Sir Roderick, together with the ghosts of queer exotic perfumes such as might have poured from the burning of unholy censers in Satanic rites. It was an effluence of mystery and of evil. Within, there were several ponderous brazen-bound volumes of mediaeval date, a thin manuscript of yellowing parchment, and two portraits whose faces had been turned to the wall, as if it were unlawful for even the darkness of the sealed door to behold them. Sir Roderick brought the volumes, the manuscript and the portraits Forth to the light. The pictures, which he examined first, represented a man and woman who were both in the bloom of life. Both were attired in Seventeenth Century costumes; and the new Sir Roderick did not doubt for a moment that they were the mysterious couple concerning whom the family records were so reticent.

He thrilled with a strange excitement, with a feeling of some momentous revelation that he could not wholly comprehend, as he looked upon them. Even at a glance, he saw the singular resemblance of the first Sir Roderick to himself — a likeness otherwise unduplicated in the family, which tended to an almost antinomian type. There were the same falcon-like features, the same pallor of brow and cheek, the same semi-morbid luster of eyes, the same bloodless lips that seemed to be carven from a marble that had also

been chiselled for the long hollow eyelids. The majority of the Hagdons were broad and sanguine and ruddy; but in these two, a darker strain had repeated itself across the centuries. The main difference was in the expression, for the look of the first Sir Roderick was that of a man who has given himself with a passionate devotion to all things evil and corrupt; who has gone down to damnation through some inevitable fatality of his own being.

Sir Roderick gazed on the picture with a fascination that was partly horror, and partly the stirring of emotions which he could not have named. Then he turned to the woman, and a wild agitation overmastered him before the sullen-smiling mouth and the malign oval of the lovely cheeks. She, too, was evil, and her beauty was that of Lilith. She was like some crimson-lipped and honey-scented flower that grows on the brink of hell; but Sir Roderick knew, with the terror and fearful rapture of one who longs to fling himself from a precipice, that here was the one woman he might have loved, if haply he had known her. Then, in a moment of reeling and whirling confusion, it seemed to him that he known and loved her, though he could not remember when or where.

The feeling of eery confusion passed; and Sir Roderick began to examine the brass-bound volumes. They were written in a barbarous decadent Latin, and dealt mainly with methods and formulas for the evocation of such demons as Acheront, Amaimon, Asmodi and Ashtoreth, together with innumerable others. Sir Roderick shuddered at the curious drawings with which they were illuminated; but they did not detain him long. With a thrill of actual trepidation, like one who is about to enter some awful and unhallowed place, he took up the manuscript of yellowing parchment.

It was late afternoon when he began to read; and rays of dusty amber were slanting through the low panes of the library windows. As he read on,

he gave no heed to the sinking of the light; and the last words were plain as runes of fire when he finished his perusal in the dusk. He closed his eyes, and could still see them:

“And Sir Roderick Hagdonne was now deemed a most infamous warlocke, and hys Ladye Elinore a nefandous witcher... And both were burned at the stake on Hagdonne Common for their crimes against God and man. And their sorcerous deedes and practices were thought so foule a blotte on ye knighthode of England, that no man speaks thereof, and no grandam tells the tale to the children at her knee. So, by God Hys mercy, the memorie of thys foulness shall haply be forgotten; for sorely itte were an ill thing that such should be recalled.”

Then, at the very bottom of the page, there was a brief, mysterious footnote in a finer hand than the rest:

“There be those amid the thronge who deemed that they saw Sir Rodericke vanish when the flames leaped high; and thys, if true, is the moste damnable proof of hys compact and hys commerce with the Evil One.”

Sir Roderick sat for a long while in the thickening twilight. He was unstrung, he was abnormally shaken and distraught by the biographical record he had just read — a record that had been written by some unknown hand in a bygone century. It was not pleasant for any man to find a tale so dreadful amid the archives of his family history. But the fact that the narrative concerned the first Sir Roderick and his Lady Elinor was hardly enough to account for all the spiritual turmoil and horror into which he was plunged. Somehow, in a way that was past analysis, that was more intimate than his regard for the remote blot on the Hagdon name, he felt that the thing concerned himself also. A terrible nervous perturbation possessed him, his very sense of identity was troubled, he was adrift in a sea of

abominable confusion, of disoriented thoughts and capsizing memories. In this peculiar state of mind, by an automatic impulse, he lit the floor-lamp beside his chair and began to re-read the manuscript.

Almost in the casual manner of a modern tale, the story opened with an account of Sir Roderick's first meeting, at the age of twenty-three, with Elinor D'Avenant, who was afterward to become his wife.

This time, as he read, a peculiar hallucination seized the new baronet. It seemed to him that the words of the old writing had begun to waver and change beneath his scrutiny; that, under the black lines of script on yellowing parchment, the picture of an actual place was forming. The page expanded, the letters grew dim and gigantic; they seemed to fade out in midair, and the picture behind them was no longer a picture, but the very scene of the narrative. As if the wording were a necromantic spell, the room about him had vanished like the chamber of a dream; and he stood in the open sunlight of a windy moor. Bees were humming around him, and the scent of heather was in his nostrils. His consciousness was indescribably dual; somewhere, he knew, one part of his brain was still reading the ancient record; but the rest of his personality had become identified with that of the first Sir Roderick Hagdon. Inevitably, with no surprise or astonishment, he found himself living in a bygone age, with the perceptions and memories of an ancestor who was long dead.

"Now Sir Roderick Hagdonne, being in the flower of hys youth, became instantlie enamoured of the beauteous Elinore D'Avenant, whenas he mette her of an Aprile morn on Hagdonne heathe."

Sir Roderick saw that he was not alone on the moor. A woman was coming toward him along the narrow path amid the heather. Though clad in the conventional gown and bodice of the period, she was somehow foreign and exotic to that familiar English landscape. She was the woman of the

portrait which, in a later life, as another Sir Roderick, he had found in a sealed room of the manor-house. (But this, like much else, he had now forgotten.) Walking with a languid grace amid the homely blossoms of the heath, her beauty was like that of some opulent and sinister lily from Saracenic lands. He thought that he had never seen any one half so strange and lovely.

He stood to one side in the stiff growth, and bowed before her with a knightly courtesy as she passed. She nodded slightly in acknowledgment, and gave him an unfathomable smile and an oblique flash of her dark eyes. From that time, Sir Roderick was her slave and her devotee: he stared after her as she disappeared on the curving slope, and felt the mounting of an irresistible flame in his heart, and the stirring of hot desires and curiosities. He seemed to inhale the spice of a languorous alien perfume with every breath of the homeland air, as he walked onward, musing with ingenuous rapture on the dark, enigmatic beauty of the face he had seen.

Now, in that queer necromantic dream, Sir Roderick seemed to live, or re-live, the events of an entire lustrum. Somewhere, in another existence, another self was conning briefly the paragraphs which detailed these events; but of this he was conscious only at long intervals, and then vaguely. So complete was his immersion in the progress of the tale (as if he had drunk of that Lethe which alone makes it possible to live again) that he was untroubled by any prevision of a future known to the Sir Roderick who sat re-reading an old manuscript. Even as it was written, he returned from the moor to Hagdon Hall with the vision of a fair stranger in his heart; he made inquiries concerning her, and learned that she was the daughter of Sir John D'Avenant, who had but recently received his knighthood for diplomatic services, and had now taken up his abode on the state near Hagdon that went with his title. Sir Roderick was now doubly impelled to call on his

new neighbors; and his first visit was soon repeated. He became an open suitor for the hand of Elinor D'Avenant; and, after a wooing of several months, he married her

The passionate love with which she had inspired him was only deepened by their life together. Always her allurements were that of things half understood, of momentous revelations eternally half withheld. She seemed to love him truly in return; but ever her heart and soul were strange to him, ever they were mysterious and exotic, even as the first sight of her face had been. For this, mayhap, he loved her all the more. They were happy together; and she bore him one child, a son whom they named Ralph.

Now, in that other life, the Sir Roderick who was reading in the old library came to these words:

“No man knew how it happened; but anon there were dreadful whispers and foul rumours regarding the Lady Elinore; and people said that she was a witch. And in their time these rumours reached the ears of Sir Roderick.”

A horror crept upon the happy dream — a horror scarce to be comprehended in this modern age. There were formless evil wings that came to brood above Hagdon Hall; and the very air was poisoned with malignant murmurs. Day by day, and night by night, the baronet was tortured with a vile, unholy suspicion of the woman he loved. He watched her with a fearful anxiety, with eyes that dreaded to discern a new and more ominous meaning in her strange beauty. Then, when he could bear it no longer, he taxed her with the infamous things he had heard, hoping she would deny them and by virtue of her denial restore fully his former trust and peace of mind.

To his utter consternation, the Lady Elinor laughed in his face, with a soft, siren-like mirth, and made open avowal that the charges were true.

“And I trow,” she added, “that you love me too well to disown or betray me; that for my sake, if need be, you will become a veritable wizard, even as I am a witch; and will share with me the infernal sports of the Sabbat.””

Sir Roderick pleaded, he cajoled, he commanded, he threatened; but ever she answered him with voluptuous laughter and Circean smiles; and ever she told him of those delights and privileges which are procurable only through damnation, through the perilous aid of demons and succubi. Till, through his exceeding love for her, even as she had foretold, Sir Roderick suffered himself to become an initiate in the arts of sorcery; and sealed his own pact with the powers of evil, that he might in all things be made forever one with her that he loved so dearly.

It was an age of dark beliefs and of practises that were no less dark; and witchcraft and sorcery were rampant throughout the land, among all classes. But in the Lilith-like Elinor there was a spirit of soulless, depravity beyond that of all others; and beneath the seduction of her love the hapless Sir Roderick fell to depths wherefrom no man could return, and made mortgage of his soul and brain and body to Satan. He learned the varying malefic usages to which a waxen image could be put; he memorized the formulas that summon frightful things from their abode in the nethermost night, or compel the dead to do the abominable will of necromancers. And he was taught the secrets whereof it is unlawful to tell or even hint; and came to know the maledictions and invocations which are lethal to more than the mortal flesh. And Hagdon Hall became the scene of pandemonian revels, of rites that were both obscene and blasphemous; and the terror and turpitude of hellish things were effluent therefrom on all the countryside. And amid her coterie of the damned, amid the witches and sorcerers and incubi that fawned upon her, the Lady Elinor exulted openly; and Sir Roderick was her partner in each new enormity or baleful deed. And in this atmosphere of

noisome things, of Satanic crime and sacrilege, the child Ralph was alone innocent, being too young to be harmed thereby as yet. But anon the scandal of it all was a horror in men's souls that could be endured no longer; and the justice of the law, which made a felony of witchcraft, was called upon by the people of Hagdon.

It was no new thing for members of the nobility to be tried on such a charge before the secular or ecclesiastical courts. Such cases, in which the accusations were often doubtful or prompted by mere malice, had sometimes been fought at length. But this time the guilt of the defendants was so universally maintained, and the reprobation arouse thereby so profound, that only the briefest and most perfunctory trial was accorded them. They were sentenced to be burnt at the stake; the sentence to be carried out on the following day.

It was a chill, dank morning in autumn when Sir Roderick and Lady Elinor were borne to the place of execution and were tied to their respective stakes, with piles of dry fagots at their feet. They were set facing each other, so that neither might lose any detail of their mutual agony. A crowd was gathered about them, thronging the entire common — a crowd whose awful silence was unbroken by any outcry or murmur. So deep was the terror wrought by this infamous couple, that no one dared to execrate or mock them even in the hour of their downfall. Sir Roderick's brain was benumbed by the obloquy and shame and horror of his situation, by a realization of the ultimate depths to which he had fallen, of the bitter doom that was now imminent. He looked at his wife, and thought of how she had drawn him down from evil to evil through his surpassing love for her; and then he thought of the frightful searing pains that would convulse her soft body; and thinking of these he forgot his own fate.

Then, in a dim, exiguous manner, he remembered that somewhere in another century there sat another Sir Roderick who was reading all this in an old manuscript. If he could only break the necromantic spell of the tale, and re-identify himself with that other Sir Roderick, he would be saved from the fiery doom that awaited him, but if he could not deny the spell, he would surely perish, even as a falling man who reaches bottom in a dream is said to perish.

He looked again, and met the gaze of the Lady Elinor. She smiled across her bonds and fagots, with all the old seduction that had been so fatal to him. In the re-attained duality of his consciousness, it seemed as if she were aware of his intention and had willed to deter him. The ache and anguish of a deadly lure was upon him, as he closed his eyes and tried very hard to picture the old library and the very sheet of parchment which his other self was now perusing. If he could do this, the whole diabolical illusion would vanish, the process of visualization and sympathetic identification which had been carried to an hallucinative degree, would return to that which is normally experienced by the reader of an absorbing tale.

There was a crackling at his feet, for some one had lit the fagots. Sir Roderick opened his eyes a little, and saw that the pile at Lady Elinor's feet had likewise been lit. Threads of smoke were rising from each pile, with tiny tongues of flame that grew longer momentarily. He did not lift his eyes to the level of Lady Elinor's face. Resolutely he closed them again, and sought to re-summon the written page.

He was aware of a brooding warmth underneath his soles; and now, with an agonizing flash of pain, he felt the licking of the flames about his ankles. But somehow, by a desperate effort of his will, like one who awakens voluntarily from a clutching nightmare, he saw before him the written words he was trying to visualize:

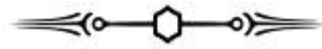
“And both were burned at the stake on Hagdonne Common for their crimes against God and man.”

The words wavered, they receded and drew near on a page that was still dim and enormous. But the crackling at his feet had ceased; the air was no longer dank and chill, no longer charged with acrid smoke. There was a moment of madly whirling vertigo and confusion; and then Sir Roderick's two selves were re-united, and he found that he was sitting in the library chair at Hagdon, staring with open eyes at the last sentences of the manuscript in his hands.

He felt as if he had been through some infernal ordeal that had lasted many years; and he was still half obsessed by emotions of sorrow and regret and horror that could belong only to a dead progenitor. But the whole thing was manifestly a dream, albeit terrible and real to a degree that he had never before experienced. He must have fallen asleep over the old record... But why, then, if it were only a dream, did his ankles still pain him so frightfully, as if they had been seared by fire?

He bent down and examined them: beneath the Twentieth Century hose in which they were attired, he found the upward-flaring marks of recent burns!

The Venus of Azombeii



THE STATUETTE WAS not more than twelve inches in height, and represented a female figure that somehow reminded me of the Medicean Venus, despite many differences of feature and proportion. It was wrought of a black wood, almost as heavy as marble; and the unknown artist had certainly made the most of his material to suggest the admixture of a negroid strain with a type of beauty well-nigh classic in its perfection of line. It stood on a pedestal formed in imitation of a half-moon, with the cloven side of the hemisphere constituting the base. On studying it more closely, I found that the resemblance to the Venus de Medici was largely in the pose and in the curves of the hips and shoulders; but the right hand was more elevated than hers in its position, and seemed to caress the polished abdomen; and the face was fuller, with a smile of enigmatic voluptuousness about the heavy lips, and a sensuous droop to the deep eyelids, which were like the petals of some exotic flower when they fold beneath a sultry velvet evening. The workmanship was quite amazing and would not have been unworthy of the more archaic and primitive periods of Roman art.

My friend Marsden had brought the figurine with him on his return from Africa; and it stood always on his library table. It had fascinated me and had stirred my curiosity from the first; but Marsden was singularly reticent concerning it; and beyond telling me that it was of negro workmanship and represented the goddess of a little-known tribe on the upper Benuwe, in Adamawa, he had so far declined to gratify my inquisitiveness. But his very reserve, and something of significant import, even of emotional perturbation in his tone whenever we spoke of the statuette, had made me

believe that a story hung thereon; and, knowing Marsden as I did, remembering his habitual reticence recurrently varied by outbursts of a well-nigh garrulous confidentiality, I felt sure that he would tell me the story in due time.

I had known Marsden ever since our school-days, for we had both been in the same year at Berkeley. He possessed few friends, and none, perhaps, who had been intimate with him as long as I. So no one was better fitted than I to perceive the inexplicable change that had come over him since his two years of traveling in Africa. This change was both physical and spiritual, and some of its features were of so subtle a character that one could hardly give them a name or seize upon them with any degree of clearness. Others, though, were all too plainly marked: the increase of Marsden's natural melancholia, turning now into fits of ferocious depression; and the woeful deterioration of his health, never too robust even in its prime, would have been noticeable to the merest acquaintance. I remembered him as being very tall and wiry, with a sallow complexion, black hair, and eyes of a clear azure blue; but since his return, he was far thinner than of old, and he stooped so much that he gave the impression of having actually lost in height; his features were shrunken and wrinkled, his skin had become corpse-like in its pallor, his hair was heavily sprinkled with gray, and his eyes had darkened in an unaccountable manner, as if they had somehow absorbed the mysteriously profound and sinister blue of tropic nights. In them, there burned a fire they had never before possessed — a macabre fire such as one would find in the eyes of a man consumed by some equatorial fever. Indeed; it often occurred to me that the readiest explanation of the change in Marsden was that he had been seized by some lethal sickness of the jungle, from which he had not yet fully recovered. But this he had always denied when I questioned him.

The more elusive alterations at which I have hinted were mainly mental, and I shall not try to define all of them. But one, in particular; was quite signal: Marsden had always been a man of undoubted courage and hardihood, with nerves that were unshakable in spite of his melancholic disposition; but now I perceived in him at times a queer furtiveness, an undefinable apprehensiveness quite at variance with his former character. Even in the midst of some trivial or commonplace conversation, a look of manifest fear would suddenly pass over his face, he would scrutinize the shadows of the room with an apprehensive stare, and would stop half-way in a sentence, apparently forgetting what he had started to say. Then, in a few moments, he would recover himself and go on with the interrupted speech. He had developed some odd mannerisms, too: one of them was, that he could never enter or leave a room without looking behind him, with the air of a man who fears that he is being followed or that some imminent doom is dogging his every footstep. But all this, of course, could have been explained as nervousness attendant upon, or resulting from, the illness that I suspected. Marsden himself would never discuss the matter; so after a few discreet suggestions that might have led him to unbosom himself, if he so wished, I had tacitly ignored the visible changes in his manner and personality. But I sensed a real and perhaps tragic mystery, and felt also that the black figurine on Marsden's table was in some way connected with it. He had told me much concerning his trip to Africa, which had been undertaken because of a life-long fascination which that continent had held for him; but I knew intuitively that much more was being kept back.

One morning, about six weeks after Marsden's return, I called to see him, following several days of absence during which I had been extremely busy. He was living alone, with one servant, in the large house on Russian Hill, San Francisco, which he had inherited together with a considerable

fortune from his parents, who were long dead. He did not come to answer my knock, as was his wont; and if my hearing were not exceptionally keen, I do not think I should have heard the feeble voice in which he called out, telling me to enter. Pushing open the door, I went through the hall into the library, from which his voice had issued, and found him lying on a sofa, near the table on which stood the black statuette. It was obvious to me at a glance that he was very ill; his thinness and pallor had increased to a shocking degree in the few days since I had seen him last, and I was immediately impressed by the singular fact that he had even shrunk more in stature than could be explained by the crouch of his shoulders. Everything about him had shriveled, and actually withered as if a flame were consuming him, and the form on the couch was that of a smaller man than my friend. He had aged, also, and his hair had taken on a new hoariness, as if white ashes had fallen upon it. His eyes were pitifully sunken, and they burned as embers burn in deep caverns. I could scarcely repress a cry of astonishment and consternation when I saw him.

“Well, Holly,” he greeted me, “I guess my days are numbered. I knew the thing would get me in time — I knew it when I left the shores of the Benuwe with that image of the goddess Wanaô for a keepsake... There are dreadful things in Africa, Holly — malignant lust, and corruption, and poison, and sorcery — things that are deadlier than death itself — at least, deadlier than death in any form that we know. Don’t ever go there — if you have any care for the safety of body and soul.”

I tried to reassure him, without paying ostensible heed to the more cryptic references, the more oracular hints in his utterance.

“There is some low African fever in your system.” I said. “You should see a doctor — should, in fact, have seen one weeks or months ago. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t get rid of the trouble, whatever it is, now that

you are back in America. But of course you need expert medical attention: you can't afford to neglect anything so insidious and obscure."

Marsden smiled — if the ghastly contortion of his lips could be called a smile. "It's no use, old man. I know my malady better than any doctor could know it. Of course, it may be that I have a little fever — that wouldn't be surprising; but the fever isn't one that has ever been classified in medical lore. And there's no cure for it in any pharmacopoeia."

With the last word, his countenance assumed a horrible grimace of pain, and seemed to shrivel before me like a sheet of paper that turns ashen with fire. He no longer appeared to notice my presence, and began to mutter brokenly, in tones of a peculiar huskiness, in a harsh, grating whisper, as if the very cords of his throat were involved in the same shrinking that affected his face. I caught most, if not all, of the words:

"She is dying, too — as I am — even though she is a living goddess... Mybaloë, why did you drink the palm-wine?... You, too, will shrivel up, and suffer these gnawing, clawing tortures... Your beautiful body... how perfect, how magnificent it was!... You shrivel up in a few weeks, like a little old woman ... you will suffer the torments of hell-fire... Mybaloë! Mybaloë!"

His speech became an indistinct moaning, in which portions of words were now and then audible. He had all the aspect of a dying man: his whole body seemed to contract, as if all the muscles, all the nerves, even the very bones, were dwindling in size, were tightening to a locked rigidity; and his lips were drawn in a horrible rictus, showing a thin white line of teeth.

I ran to Marsden's dining-room, where I knew that a decanter full of old Scotch usually stood on the sideboard, and filled a sherry-glass with liquor. Hastening back, I succeeded, though with extreme difficulty, in forcing some of the strong spirit between his teeth. The effect was almost immediate: he revived into full consciousness, his facial muscles relaxed,

and he no longer wore the look of tetanic agony that had possessed his whole body.

I'm sorry to have been such a bother," he said. "But the crisis is past for today... Tomorrow, though ... that'll be another matter." He shuddered, and his eyes were dark with the haunting of some incombustible horror.

I made him drink the remainder of the whisky, and going to the telephone, took the liberty of summoning a doctor whose abilities were personally known to both of us. My friend smiled a little, in grateful recognition of my solicitude, but shook his head.

"The end won't be so very far off now," he said. "I know the symptoms; it's a matter of a fortnight, or little more, when matters reach the point that they have reached today."

"But what is it?" I cried. The query was prompted by horror and solicitude, more than curiosity.

"You will learn soon enough," he replied, pointing to the library table with a forefinger of skeleton thinness. "Do you see that manuscript?"

Following his direction, I perceived on the table, close to the wooden statuette, a pile of written sheets, which, in my natural concern regarding Marsden's illness, I had not before noticed.

"You are my oldest friend," he went on, "and I have been aware for quite a while past that I owe you an explanation of certain things that have puzzled you. But the matters involved are so strange, and so peculiarly intimate, that I have been unable to bring myself to a frank confession face to face. So I have written for you a full narration of the final two months of my stay in Africa, concerning which I have spoken so little heretofore. You are to take it home with you when you leave; but I must beg you not to read the manuscript until after my death. I am sure I can trust you to respect my wishes in this regard. When you read it; you will learn the cause of my

illness, and the story of the black figurine which has tantalized your curiosity so much.”

A few minutes later, there came a knock on the door, and I went to answer it. As I expected, it was Dr. Pelton, who lived only a few blocks away, and who had left home immediately in reply to my summons. He was a brisk and confident type of person, with the air of habitual reassurance, of professional good cheer, that goes so far in building up a doctor's reputation for proficiency. But I could see beneath his manner an undertone of doubt, of real bafflement, as he examined Marsden.

“I'm not altogether sure what is wrong,” he admitted, “but I think the trouble is mainly digestive and nervous. Doubtless the African climate, and the food, must have upset you quite radically. You will need a nurse, if there is any recurrence of the attack you have had today.”

He wrote a prescription, and left shortly after. Since I had a pressing engagement, I was obliged to follow him in about half an hour, taking with me the manuscript that Marsden had indicated. But before going, I called a nurse by telephone, with Marsden's authority, and left her in charge, promising to return as soon as possible.

Of the fortnight that followed, with the frightful protracted agonies, the brief and illusory shifts for the better, the ghastly relapses that characterized my friend's condition, I can not bear to write a full account. I spent with him all the time I could spare, for my presence seemed to comfort him a little, except during the awful daily crises, when he was beyond all consciousness of his surroundings. Toward the last, there were lengthening intervals of delirium, when he muttered wildly, or screamed aloud in terror of things or persons visible only to himself. To be with him, to watch him, was an ordeal without parallel; and to me, the most dreadful thing about it all was the progressive shriveling, the perpetual diminution of Marsden's

head and body, and the lessening of his very stature, which went on hour by hour and day by day with paroxysmal accompaniments of a suffering not to be borne by human flesh without lapsing into madness or oblivion... But I cannot enter into details, or describe the final stages; and I hardly dare even hint the condition in which he died and in which his body went to the undertaker. I can only say that in their extreme, their more than infantile dwarfage and devolution of form, the remains bore no likeness to anything that it would be permissible to name; also, that the task of the undertaker and the pall-bearers was phenomenally light... When the end came, I gave thanks to God for the belated mercy of my friend's death. I was completely worn out, and it was not until after the funeral that I summoned enough energy and resolution for a perusal of Marsden's manuscript.

The account was clearly written, in a fine, feline script, though the handwriting bore evidence of stress, and agitation toward the end. I transcribe the narrative hereunder, with no liberties of abridgment or amplification:

I, Julius Marsden, have experienced all my life the ineffable nostalgia of the far-off and the unknown. I have loved the very names of remote places, of antipodean seas and continents and isles. But I have never found in any other word even a tithe of the untellable charm that has lain inherent for me ever since childhood in the three syllables of the word Africa. They have conjured up for me, as by some necromantic spell, the very quintessence of ill mystery, of all romance, and no woman's name could have been dearer to me, or more eloquent of delight and allure, than the name of this obscure continent. By a happy dispensation, which, alas! does not invariably attend the fulfilment of our dreams, my twenty-two months of sojourning in Morocco, Tunis, Egypt, Zanzibar, Senegal, Dahomey and Nigeria had in no way disappointed me, for the reality was astoundingly like my vision. In the

hot and heavy azure of the skies, the great level of desert sand or of rampant jungles, the long and mighty rivers winding through landscapes of unbelievable diversity, I found something that was deeply congenial to my spirit. It was a realm in which my rarest dreams could dwell and expand with a sense of freedom never achievable elsewhere.

At the end of the twenty-second month of my sojourn, I was traveling on the upper reaches of the river Benuwe, that great eastern tributary of the Niger. My immediate objective was Lake Tchad, with whose confluent rivers the Benuwe is connected by means of an upland swamp. I had left Yollah, with several boatmen of the Foulah tribe, a race of negroid Mohammedans, and we had now rounded the eastern slope of Mount Alantika, that enormous granite bulk that looms for nine thousand feet from the fertile plains of Adamawa.

It was a picturesque and beautiful country through which we were passing. There were occasional villages surrounded by fields of durra, of cotton yams, and great stretches of wild, luxuriant forest, or baobabs, bananas, deleb-palms, pandanus and plaintains, beyond which arose the castellated tops of ridgy hills and fantastically carved cliffs.

Toward sunset, Alantika had become a bluish blur in the distance, above the green sea of the jungle. As we went onward in our two small barges, one of which was mainly laden with my personal effects, I perceived that my boatmen were conversing among themselves in low voices, and caught a frequent repetition of the word "Azombeii," always with a note of fear and warning.

I had already picked up a little of the Foulah language; and one of the boatmen, a tall, well-featured fellow, bronze rather than black, was master of a sort of broken German variegated with a few words of English. I questioned him as to the subject and import of the conversation, and learned

that Azombeii was the name of the district we were now approaching, which, he declared, was peopled by a pagan tribe of unusual ferocity, who were still suspected of cannibalism and human sacrifice. They had never been properly subdued, either by the Mohammedan conquerors of the country or by the present German administration, and lived very much to themselves in their own primeval way, worshipping a goddess named Wanaô's — a goddess unfamiliar to the other pagan tribes of Adamawa, who were all fetishists. They were especially inimical toward the Mohammedan negroes, and it was perilous to intrude upon their territory, particularly during the annual religious festival now being celebrated. He and his fellows, he confessed, were loath to proceed much farther.

On all this, at the time, I made no express comment. To me, the story seemed none too credible, and savored of the ignorant prejudice of insular peoples, who are ever suspicious and fearful of those beyond their own borders. But I was a little disturbed, for I did not want the course of my journey to be suspended by any difficulty with my boatmen or the natives.

The sun had now gone down with a tropical abruptness, and in the brief twilight I saw that the forest on the river-banks had become more dense and exuberant than any through which we had before passed. There were ancient baobabs, enormous in the gloom; and the pendant leaves of mammoth plants fell down to the river like cataracts of emerald. Over all, a primordial silence reigned — a silence fraught with the burden of things unutterable by human speech — with the furtive pulse of an esoteric and exotic life, the secret breathing of unformulable passion, of unapprehended peril, the spirit of a vast and insuppressible fecundity.

We landed on a grassy margin, and proceeded to make our camp for the night. After a meal of yams and ground-nuts and tinned meat, to which I added a little palm-wine, I brought up the matter of continuing our journey

on the morrow; but not until I had pledged myself to triple the boatmen's wages would they promise to take me through the Azombeii country. I more than ever inclined to make light of their fears, and, in fact, had begun to suspect that the whole business was mere play-acting, with no other purpose than the extortion of an increase of pay. But this, of course, I could not prove; and the boatmen were full of an apparent reluctance, vowing by Allah and his prophet Mohammed that the danger they would incur was incomparably dire — that they, and even myself, might furnish soup-meat for the revels of Azombeii, or smoke on a pagan altar, before the setting of tomorrow's sun. They also told me some curious details concerning the customs and beliefs of the people of Azombeii. These people, they said, were ruled by a woman who was looked upon as the living representative of the goddess Wanaô, and who shared the divine honors accorded to her. Wanaô, as far as I could gather, appeared to be a goddess of love and procreation, resembling somewhat in her character both the Roman Venus and the Carthaginian Tanit. I was struck even then by a certain etymological similarity of her name to that of Venus — a similarity regarding which I was soon to learn more. She was worshipped, they told me, with rites and ceremonies of an orgiastic license beyond all parallel — a license which shocked even the neighboring pagans, who were themselves given to vile practises not to be tolerated by any virtuous Moslem. They went on to say that the Azombeiians were also addicted to sorcery, and that their witch-doctors were feared throughout Adamawa.

My curiosity was aroused, though I told myself that in all probability the rumors related by the boatmen were fables or gross exaggerations. But I had seen something of negro religious rites, and was able to credit the tales of orgiastic excess, at any rate. Pondering the strange stories I had heard, my

imagination became excited, and I did not fall asleep till after an unwonted interval.

My slumber was heavy, and full of troubled dreams that appeared to prolong intolerably the duration of the night. I awoke a little before dawn, when the red horn of a waning moon had begun to set behind the separate edges of palm-trees in the west. Looking about in the half-light, with eyes that were still bemused with sleep, I found myself entirely alone: The boatmen and their barges were gone, though all of my personal property and some of the provisions had been left behind with an honesty quite scrupulous, considering the circumstances. Evidently the fears expressed by the Foulahs had been genuine, and discretion had overpowered their desire for gain.

Somewhat dismayed by the prospect of having to continue my journey alone — if it were to be continued at all — and without means of navigation or conveyance, I stood irresolute on the river-bank, as the dawn began to brighten. I did not like the idea of turning back; and, since I did not consider it at all probable that I could be in any bodily danger at the hands of the natives, in a region under German rule, I finally resolved to go on and try to engage bearers or boatmen in the Azombeii district. It would be necessary for me to leave most of my effects by the river for the present, and return for them later, trusting to find them undisturbed.

I had no sooner made up my mind to this course of procedure, than I heard a soft rustling in the long grasses behind me. Turning, I perceived that I was no longer alone, though my companions were not the Foulahs, as I had hoped for a brief instant. Two negro women, attired in little more than the lightening amber air of morn, stood close beside me. Both were fairly tall, and well-proportioned, but it was the foremost of the two who caught

my attention with a veritable shock of surprise not altogether due to the suddenness of her approach.

Her appearance would have surprised me anywhere, at any time. Her skin was a lustrous velvet black, with subtle gleams of rapid-running bronze; but all her features and proportions, by some astounding anomaly, were those of an antique Venus. Indeed, I have seldom seen in Caucasian women a more consummate regularity of profile and facial contour. As she stood before me without moving, she might have been a woman of Rome or Pompeii, sculptured in black marble by a statuary of the Latin decadence. She wore a look that was both demure and sensual, an expression full of cryptic poise allied with great sweetness. Her hair was done in a rich coil on the nape of a comely neck. Between her breasts, on a chain of beaten silver, hung several ruddy garnets, carved with rough intaglios whose precise nature I did not notice at the time. Her eyes met mine with perfect frankness, and she smiled with an air of naive delight and mischief at my all-too-obvious dumfounding. That smile made me her voluntary captive henceforward.

The second woman was of a more negroid type, though personable enough in her way. By her bearing and demeanor, she gave the impression of being somehow subordinate to the first, and I assumed that she was a slave or servant. The one semblance of a garment worn by both was a little square of cloth depending in front from a girdle of palm-fiber; but the fabric of the square worn by the first was finer than that of the other, and differed from it in having a fringe of silky tassels.

The leader turned and spoke a few words to her companion in mellifluous liquid tones, and the servant replied in a voice almost equally soft and musical; The word "Aroumani" was repeated several times, with accompanying glances at me, and I readily surmised that I was the theme of

their conversation. I could not understand their speech, which bore no likeness to the Foulah language, and, indeed, was different from that of any pagan tribe I had so far encountered in Adamawa. But some of the vocables teased me with a vague sense of familiarity, though I could not define or align this familiarity at the moment.

I addressed the two women in the scant Foulah that I knew, asking if they were of the Azombeii tribe. They smiled, and nodded their heads in recognition of the word, and made signs to me that I was to follow them.

The sun had now leapt above the horizon, and the forest was filled with a great and golden radiance as the women led me away from the river-shore and along a meandering path among gigantic baobabs. They walked before me with a grave and effortless grace, and the leader looked back every now and then over her shapely shoulder, smiling with a complaisant curve of the full lips and a delicious droop of the carven lids that had in them a trace of simple coquetry. I followed, half overcome by emotions that were new to me — by the first pulsations of a mounting fever of the senses and the mind, the stirring of unfamiliar curiosities, the subtle or, the poppy-drowsy delight of a Circean enchantment. I felt as if the immemorial attraction of Africa had suddenly become embodied for me in a human shape.

The forest began to thin, and we came to cultivated fields, and then to a large village of clay huts. My sable guides pointed to the village, saying the one word: “Azombeii,” which, as I learned later, was the name of the principal town as well as of the district in general.

The place was astir with negroes, many of whom, both male and female, were possessed of a clear-cut type of feature unaccountably reminiscent of the classical, and similar to that of the two women. Their skins varied from darkest ebony to a sultry, tarnished copper. Many of them crowded around us immediately, regarding me with a sort of friendly inquisitiveness, and

making signs of obeisance and reverence before my Venuslike companion. It was clear that she occupied a place of high importance among them, and I wondered, not for the first time, if she were the woman of whom the Foulahs had spoken — the ruler of the Azombeii and the living viceregent of the goddess Wanaô's.

I tried to converse with the natives, but could not make myself understood until an old man with a bald head and a straggling fringe of gray beard came forward and hailed me in broken English. He, it seemed, had traveled as far afield as Nigeria during his youth, which accounted for his linguistic accomplishments. None of the others had ever been more than a few miles beyond the confines of his own territory; and apparently the tribe had little intercourse with outsiders, either negro or Caucasian.

The old man was most affable and loquacious, evidently delighting in an opportunity to air his command of a foreign tongue. It was hardly necessary to question him, for he began at once to volunteer the information which I desired. His people, he announced, were very glad to see me, for they were friendly toward the whites, though they had no manner of use for the Moslem negroes of Adamawa. Also, he went on, it was manifest that I had won the favor and protection of the goddess Wanaô's, since I appeared among them under the guidance of Mybaloë, their beloved ruler, in whom the spirit of the goddess resided. At this, he made an humble obeisance toward my lovely guide, who smiled, and addressed a few sentences to him, which he forthwith interpreted, saying that Mybaloë had proffered me an invitation to remain in Azombeii as her guest.

I had intended to broach immediately the matter of hiring bearers, or engaging boatmen for the continuance of my journey on the Benuwe; but at this invitation, and the sweet, wistful, almost supplicating look which Mybaloë directed upon me as her words were being translated, I forgot all

about my plans, and told the interpreter to thank Mybaloë and say that I accepted the invitation. A few hours earlier, I should not have dreamt of the possibility of feeling any specific interest in a black woman, since that aspect of the charm of Africa was one which had never really touched me heretofore. But now, the first weavings of an unforeseen magic were upon me: my senses had become preternaturally active, and my normal processes of thought were benumbed as by the working of some insidious opiate. I had been eager to reach Lake Tchad, and the idea of tarrying by the way had never before occurred to me: now, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to remain in Azombeii, and Lake Tchad became a dimly receding mirage, far off on the borders of oblivion.

Mybaloë's face grew radiant as a summer morn, when my acceptance was interpreted. She spoke to some of the people about her, obviously giving them instructions. Then she disappeared into the crowd, and the old interpreter, with several others, led me to a hut which they put at my disposal. The hut was quite clean, and the floors were strewn with strips of palm-leaf, which exhaled an agreeable odor. Food and wine were set before me and the old man and two girls remained in attendance, saying that they had been appointed as my servants. I had barely finished my meal, when some more natives entered, bearing the belongings I had left by the river-side.

Now, in reply to my queries, the interpreter, whose name was Nygaza, told me as much as his rudimentary English would convey regarding the history, habits and religion of the people of Azombeii. According to their traditions, the worship of Wanaô's among them was almost as old as the world itself, and had been introduced ages and ages ago by some white strangers from the north, who called themselves Aroumani. These strangers had settled and married among the natives, and their blood had gradually

become disseminated throughout the whole, tribe, who had always remained apart from the other pagans of Adamawa. All white people were called Aroumani by them, and were looked upon with peculiar respect, on account of these traditions. Wanaô's, as the Foulahs had said, was a deity of love and fecundation, the mother of all life, the mistress of the world, and her image had been accurately graven in wood by the pale strangers, so that the Azombeians might have an exemplar for their idol. It had always been customary to associate a living woman with her worship, as a sort of avatar or embodiment of the goddess, and the most beautiful maiden of the district was chosen by the priests and priestesses for this rôle, and filled also the office of queen, with the privilege of taking to herself a male consort. Mybaloë, a girl of eighteen, had recently been elected; and the annual festival of Wanaô's, which consisted of liberal drinking and feasting, together with nightly ceremonies of worship, was now in progress.

While I listened to the old man, I indulged in certain speculations of a surprising order. I deemed it not impossible that the pale strangers of whom he spoke had been a party of Roman explorers, who had crossed the Sahara from Carthage and penetrated the Sudan. This would account for the classic features of Mybaloë and others of the Azombeians, and for the name and character of the local goddess. Also, the vague familiarity of some of the words spoken by Mybaloë was now explicable, since I realized that these words had borne a partial resemblance to Latin vocables. Much amazed by what I had learned and by all that I had succeeded in piecing together, I lost myself in odd reveries, while Nygaza continued his babbling.

The day wore on, and I did not see Mybaloë, as I had fully expected, nor did I receive word from her. I began to wonder a little. Nygaza said that her absence was attributable only to urgent duties; he leered discreetly, as he assured me that I would soon see her again.

I went for a walk through the village, accompanied by the interpreter and the girls, who refused to leave me for a moment. The town, as I have said, was large for an African village, and must have comprised two or three thousand people. All was neat and orderly, and general degree of cleanliness was quite remarkable. The Azombeians, I could see, were thrifty and industrious, and gave evidence of many civilized qualities.

Toward the hour of sunset, a messenger came, bearing an invitation from Mybaloë, which Nygaza translated. I was to dine with her in her palace, and then attend the evening rites in the local temple.

The palace stood on the very outskirts of the town, among palms and pandanus, and was merely an overgrown hut, as African palaces are wont to be. But the interior proved to be quite comfortable, even luxurious, and a certain barbaric taste had been displayed in its furnishing. There were low couches along the walls, covered with draperies of native weaving, or the skins of the ayu, a sort of fresh-water seal found in the Benuwe. In the center was a long table, not more than a foot in height from the floor, around which the guests were squatted. In one corner, as in a niche, I noticed a small wooden image of a female figure, which I rightly took to be a representation of Wanaôs. The figure bore a strange resemblance to the Roman Venus; but I need not describe it further, since you have often seen it on my library table.

Mybaloë greeted me with many compliments, which were duly translated by Nygaza; and I, not to be outdone, replied with speeches of a flowery fervor by no means insincere. My hostess had me seated at her right hand, and the feast began. The guests, I learned, were mostly priests and priestesses of Wanaôs. All of them regarded me with friendly smiles, with the exception of one man, who wore a murderous frown.

This man, Nygaza told me in a whisper almost inaudible, was the high-priest Mergawe, a mighty sorcerer or witch-doctor, much feared rather than revered, who had long been in love with Mybaloë and had hoped to be chosen for her consort.

As unobtrusively as I could, I surveyed Mergawe with more attention. He was a muscular brute, over six feet in height, and broad without being stout. His face was regular in outline, and would have been handsome, were it not for the distortion due to a most malignant expression. Whenever Mybaloë smiled upon me or addressed some remark to me through Nygaza, his look became a demoniacal glare. I readily perceived that the first day of my visit in Azombeii had brought me a powerful enemy, as well as a possible sweetheart.

The table was laden with equatorial delicacies, with the meat of young rhinoceros, several kinds of wild fowl, bananas, papayas, and a sweet, highly intoxicating palm-wine. Most of the guests were prone to gorge themselves in true African fashion, but Mybaloë's manner of eating was as dainty as that of any European girl, and she endeared herself to me all the more by her restraint, Mergawe also ate little, but drank immoderately, in a seeming attempt to achieve inebriation as soon as possible. The eating and drinking went on for hours, but I paid less and less attention to it and to my fellow-guests, in the ever-growing enchantment of Mybaloë's presence. Her sinuous youthful grace of figure, her lovely tender eyes and lips, were far more potent than the wine, and I soon forgot to notice even the baleful glaring of Mergawe. On her part, Mybaloë displayed toward me a frank favor, swiftly conceived and avowed, which she did not even dream of disguising. She and I began to speak a language which did not require the interpretation of old Nygaza. With the one exception of Mergawe, no one seemed to regard our mutual infatuation with anything but approval.

Presently the time of the evening rites approached, and Mybaloë excused herself, telling me that she would meet me later in the temple. The gathering broke up, and Nygaza led me through the nocturnal village, where groups of people were feasting and revelling about their fires in the open air. We entered the jungle, which was full of voices and flitting shadowy forms, all on their way to the fane of Wanaôs. I had no idea what the temple would be like, though somehow I did not expect the usual African fetish-house. To my surprize, it proved to be an enormous cave in a hill back of the village. It was illumined by many torches, and had already become crowded with the worshippers. At the farther end of the huge chamber, whose lofty vault was dark with impenetrable shadow, there stood on a sort of natural dais an image of Wanaôs, carved in the customary black wood of a tree that is native to Azombeii. The image was somewhat more than life-size. Beside it, on a wooden seat that could easily have accommodated another person, sat Mybaloë, statuesque and immobile as the goddess herself. Fragrant leaves and grasses were burning on a low altar, and tom-toms were throbbing with delirious insistence, regular as the beating of turgid pulses, in the gloom behind the goddess and her mortal viceregent. The priests, priestesses and devotees were all naked, except for little squares of doth similar to that worn by Mybaloë, and their bodies gleamed like polished metal in the wildly flickering light of the torches. All were chanting a solemn monotonous litany, and they swayed in the slow movements of a hieratic dance, lifting their arms toward Wanaôs, as if to invoke her favor.

There was an undeniable impressiveness about it all; and as if by contagion, a bizarre excitement began to invade me, and something of the sacred fervor felt by the devotees found its way into my own blood. With eyes intent upon Mybaloë, who seemed to be in a veritable trance, unconscious or unheedful of all about her, I felt the resurgence of atavistic

impulses, of barbaric passions and superstitions, latent in the subterranean depths of being. I knew the promptings of a savage hysteria, of a lust both animal and religious.

The old interpreter, who had disappeared in the throng, returned to my side anon, saying that Mybaloë had requested that I come forward to her seat. How the request had been communicated I can not imagine, for surely her lips had never opened or moved beneath my intent and passionate watching. The worshippers made way for me, and I stood before her, thrilling almost with a kind of awe, as well as a frenetic desire, when I met her eyes that were filled by the solemn possession of the amorous deity. She motioned me to seat myself beside her. By this act, as I learned later, she selected me before all the world as her consort, and I, by accepting the invitation, became her official lover.

Now, as if my enthronement with Mybaloë were a signal, the ceremonies took on a new excitation, with an orgiastic trend at which I can only hint. Things were done at which Tiberias would have blushed: Elefantis itself could have learned more than one secret from these savages. The cavern became a scene of indiscriminate revel, and the goddess and her representative were alike forgotten in the practise of rites that were doubtless appropriate enough, considering the nature of Wanaô's, even though they were highly improper from a civilized viewpoint. Through it all, Mybaloë maintained a perfect immobility, with open eyes whose lids were still as those of the statue. At last she arose and looked around the cavern upon her oblivious devotees with a gaze that was wholly inscrutable. Then she turned to me, with a demure smile and a slight movement of the hand, and beckoned me to follow her. Unnoticed by any one, we left the orgies and came forth upon the open jungle, where warm gusts of perfume wandered beneath the tropical stars...

From that night there began for me a new life — a life which I will not try to defend, but will only describe, as far as any description is possible. I had never before conceived of anything of the sort; I should never have believed myself capable of the sensuous fervor I felt for Mybaloë, and the almost inenarrable experiences into which her love initiated me. The dark electric vitality of the very earth upon which I trod, the humid warmth of the atmosphere, the life of the swiftly growing luxuriant plants, all became an intimate part of my own entity, were mingled with the ebb and flow of my blood, and I drew nearer than ever before to the secret of the charm that had lured me across the world to that esoteric continent. A powerful fever exalted all my senses, a deep indolence bedrugged my brain. I lived, as never before, and never again, to the full capacity of my corporeal being. I knew, as an aborigine knows, the mystic impact of perfume and color and savor and tactual sensation. Through the flesh of Mybaloë, I touched the primal reality of the physical world. I had no longer any thoughts, or even dreams, in the abstract meaning of such terms, but existed wholly in relation to my surroundings, to the diurnal flux of light and darkness, of sleep and passion, and all sensory impressions.

Mybaloë, I am sure, was indeed lovable, and her charm, though highly voluptuous, was not altogether of the body. She had a fresh and naive nature, laughter loving and kindly, with less of actual or latent cruelty than is common to the African. And always I found in her, even apart from her form and features, a delightful suggestion of the elder pagan world, a hint of the classic woman and the goddess of old myths. Her sorcery, perhaps, was not really complex; but its power complete, and lay as far beyond analysis as beyond denial. I became the ecstatic slave of a loving and indulgent queen.

The flowers of an equatorial spring were now in bloom, and our nights were opiate or aphrodisiac with their fragrance. The nocturnal heavens were full of fervid stars, the moons were balmy and propitious, and the people of Azombeii looked with favor upon our love, since the will of Mybaloë was to them the will of the goddess.

One cloud alone — a cloud which we scarcely regarded at first — was visible in our firmament. This cloud was the jealousy and ill-will of Mergawe, the high-priest of Wanaôs. He glowered with a lethal malignity, sullen as a negro Satan, whenever I happened to meet him; but his ill-will was not otherwise demonstrated, either by word or act; and Nygaza and Mybaloë both assured me that overt hostility on his part would be most improbable at any time, since, because of Mybaloë's divine office and my position as her lover, anything of the sort would savor of actual blasphemy.

As for me, I felt an intuitive distrust of the sorcerer, though I was far too happy to expend much thought on the problem of his potential maleficence. However, the man was an interesting type, and his reputation was literally something with which to conjure. People believed that he knew the language of animals, and could even hold converse with trees and stones, which accorded him whatever information he might require. He was reputed to be a master of what is known as "bad fetish" — that is to say, he could lay an evil spell on the person or possessions of whosoever had incurred his enmity. He was a practitioner of involution, and was also said to know the secret of a terrible slow poison, which caused its victims to wither up and shrivel to the statue of a new-born child, with prolonged and hellish agonies — a poison which did not begin to operate for weeks or even months after the time of its consumption.

The days went by, and I lost all proper count of their passage, reckoning time only by the hours I spent with Mybaloë. The world and its fullness

were ours — ours were the deep-blue heavens and the flowering forest and the grassy meadows by the riverside. As lovers are prone to do, we found for ourselves more than one favorite haunt, to which we liked to repair at recurrent intervals. One of these haunts was a grotto behind the cave-temple of Wanaôs, in whose center was a great pool fed by the river Benuwe through subterranean channels. At some remote time, the roof of the grotto had broken in, leaving a palm-fringed aperture in the hill-top, through which the sunlight or moonlight fell with precipitate rays upon the somber waters. Around the sides there were many broad ledges and fantastic alcoves of columnar stone. It was a place of weird beauty, and Mybaloë and I had spent more than one moon-lit hour on the couch-like shelves above the pool, were inhabited by several crocodiles, but of these we took little heed, absorbed in each other and in, the bizarre loveliness of the grotto, that always changed with the changing light.

One day, Mybaloë had been summoned away from the village on some errand whose nature I can not now remember. Doubtless it concerned some problem of justice or native politics. At any rate, she was not expected back till the following noon. Therefore, I was quite surprized when a messenger came to me at evening, with word that Mybaloë would return sooner than she had planned, and that she requested me to meet her in the grotto behind the cave of Wanaos at the hour when the rays of the moon, now slightly gibbous, would first fall through the opening above. The native who brought the message was a man I had never seen before, but of this I thought nothing, since he purported to come from the outlying village to which Mybaloë had been called.

I reached the cavern at the hour appointed, and paused on the verge of one of the ledges, looking about in the uncertain light for Mybaloë. The moon had begun to pour a faery radiance over the rough edge of the pit in

the cavern-dome. I saw a stealthy movement in the waters beneath me, where a crocodile slid through the silver-gleaming ebony of the surface; but of Mybaloë herself I could find no visible sign anywhere. I wondered if she were not hiding from me in some prankish mood, and resolved to make a search of the alcoves and shelves on tiptoe, in order to surprize her.

I was about to leave the ledge on which I stood, when I received a violent push from behind; which precipitated me with a headlong suddenness into the black pool seven or eight feet below. The waters were deep, and I sank almost to the bottom before I recovered myself or even realized what had happened. Then I rose and struck out blindly for the shore, remembering with a thrill of terror the crocodile I had seen a moment before my fall. I reached the edge, where it shelved down with accessible gradations, but the water was still deep, and my fingers slipped on the smooth stone. Behind me, I heard a furtive rippling, and knew its causation all too well. Turning my head, I saw two of the great saurians, whose eyes burned with unholy phosphorescence in the moonlight as they glided toward me.

I think that I must have cried aloud; for, as if in answer, I heard a woman's voice cry out on the ledge above, and then the rippled waters were cleft by a falling form that shone for an instant with a flash as of black marble. A breathless interval, while the waters foamed, and then a well-known head arose beside me, and an arm that held aloft a glittering knife. It was Mybaloë herself. With miraculous adroitness, she drove the knife to its hilt in the side of the foremost crocodile, as the monster opened his formidable jaws to seize me. Her stroke had found the heart, and the crocodile slipped back beneath the surface, thrashing about in a brief agony. But its companion came on without pausing, and met the same unerring thrust of Mybaloë knife. There were stirrings in the pool, and the dark

bodies of others began to appear. With a superhuman agility, in what was seemingly no more than a single movement, Mybaloë drew herself out on the rocks of the margent, and caught my hands in hers. An instant more, and I stood beside her, hardly knowing how I had come there, so light and swift had been my ascent. The crocodiles were nosing the shore beneath us when I turned to look back.

Breathless and dripping, we sat on a moon-bright shelf of the cavern and began to question each other, with tender interludes of silence and caresses. In a few weeks, I had learned much of the Azombeiiian tongue, and we no longer required an interpreter at any time.

To my astonishment, Mybaloë denied having sent me a messenger that evening. She had returned because of overwhelming premonition of some imminent evil that menaced me, and had felt herself drawn irresistibly to the grotto, arriving just in time to find me floundering in the pool. While passing through the cave of Wanaôs, from which a low tunnel led to the open grotto, she had met a man in the darkness, and thought that it might have been Mergawe. He had passed without speaking, in as much haste as Mybaloë herself. I told her of the push I had received from behind as I stood on the ledge. It was all too evident that I had been lured to the cavern by some one who desired to make away with me; and, as far as we knew, Mergawe was the one person in Azombeii capable of conceiving or nurturing such a motive. Mybaloë became very grave, and little more was said between us regarding the matter.

After our return to the village, Mybaloë sent several men to search for Mergawe and bring him before her. But the sorcerer had disappeared, and no one could tell his whereabouts, though more than one person had seen him earlier in the evening. He did not return to his dwelling on the morrow; and though a sedulous and thorough quest was instituted throughout the

whole of Azombeii, no trace of him could be found during the days following. His very disappearance, of course, was taken for an implicit confession of guilt. Supreme indignation was rife among the people when the episode in the grotto became publicly known; and in spite of the fear his reputation had evoked, Mergawe would have fared disastrously at their hands, and the sentence of death pronounced against him by Mybaloë would have been needless, if he had dared to show himself among his fellow-tribesmen.

The unexpected peril I had faced, and the marvelous rescue effected by Mybaloë, served to draw us even closer together, and our passion found a new depth and gravity henceforward. But as time went on, and nothing was heard of Mergawe, who seemed to have been swallowed up by the wide and sultry silence of the equatorial spaces, the episode began to recede, and gradually dwindled to our view in a lengthening perspective of blissful days. We ceased to apprehend any further attempt at harm on the part of the witch-doctor, and were lulled to an indolent security, in which our happiness took on the hues of its maturing summer.

One night, the priests of Wanaôs were giving a dinner in my honor. Forty or fifty people were already gathered in a banqueting-hall not far from the temple, but Mybaloë had not yet arrived. As we sat awaiting her, a man entered, bearing a large calabash full of palm-wine. The man was a stranger to me, though he was evidently known to some of the people present, who hailed him by name, calling him Marvasi.

Addressing me, Marvasi explained that he had been sent by the people of an outland community with a gift of palm-wine, which they hoped that I, as the consort of Mybaloë, would deign to accept. I thanked him, and bade him convey my acknowledgement to the donors of the wine.

“Will you not taste the wine now?” he said, “I must return immediately; but before leaving, I should like to learn if the gift meets with your approval, so that I can tell my people.”

I poured out some of the wine into a cup and drank it very slowly, as one does in testing the savor and quality of a beverage. It was quite sweet and heavy, with a peculiar after-flavor of puckerish bitterness which I did not find altogether agreeable. However, I praised the wine, not wishing to hurt Marvasi’s feelings. He grinned with apparent pleasure at my words, and was about to depart, when Mybaloë entered. She was panting with haste, her expression was both wild and stern, and her eyes blazed with unnatural fire. Rushing up to me, she snatched the empty wine-cup from my fingers.

“You have drunk it?” she cried, in a tone of statement more than of query.

“Yes,” I replied, in great wonder and perplexity.

The look that she turned upon me was indescribable, and full of conflicting elements. Horror, agony, devotion, love and fury were mingled in it, but I knew somehow that the fury was not directed toward me. For one intense moment her eyes held mine; then, averting her face, she pointed to Marvasi and bade the priests of Wanaôs to seize and bind him. The command was instantly obeyed. But before offering any explanation, and without saying a word to me or to anyone, Mybaloë poured out a cupful of the palm-wine and drank it at a single draft. Beginning to suspect the truth, I would have seized it from her hand, but she was too quick for me.

“Now we will both die,” she said, when she had emptied the cup. For a moment, her face assumed a tranquil smile, then it became the countenance of an avenging goddess as she turned her attention to the wretched Marvasi. Every one present had now surmised the truth, and mutterings of rage and horror were heard on all sides. Marvasi would have been torn limb from

limb, joint from joint, muscle from muscle, by the bare hands of the priests if it had not been for Mybaloë, who intervened and told them to wait. Stricken with abject terror, the man cowered among his captors, knowing too well the manner of doom that would be meted out to him in spite of any momentary reprieve.

Mybaloë began to interrogate him in brief, stern sentences, and Marvasi, whose awe of her was even more patent than his fear of the priests, made answer with many stammerings as he cringed and fawned. He confessed that the wine was poisoned; also, that he had been hired by the sorcerer and high-priest Mergawe to proffer it to me and see that I drank some of it at once, if possible. Mergawe, he said, had been hiding in the forest on the borders of Azombeii for weeks, living in a secret cavern known only to himself and a few adherents, who had brought him food and such news as he desired to learn. Marvasi, who was under certain intimate obligations to Mergawe, and had been used by him as a tool on other occasions, was one of these adherents.

“Where is Mergawe now?” questioned Mybaloë. Marvasi would have hesitated, but the eyes of the queen, ablaze with anger and with superhuman mesmerism, dragged the very truth from his reluctant lips. He said that Mergawe was now lurking in the jungle, on the outskirts of the town of Azombeii, waiting for assurance that the poison had been drunk by its intended victim.

A number of the priests were at once dispatched to find Mergawe. While they were absent, Mybaloë told me how warning of the plan to poison me had been brought to her by another of Mergawe’s friends, who had recoiled at the final hour from the atrociousness and audacity of such a design.

The priests returned in a little while, bringing the captive sorcerer. They had succeeded in coming upon him unaware, and though he struggled with

demoniacal strength and fury, they bore him down and bound him with thongs of rhinoceros hide. They brought him into the banqueting-hall amid a horror-frozen silence.

In spite of his desperate predicament, the face of the sorcerer was full of a malevolent triumph, as he stood before us. Proud, and superbly erect, he gave no evidence of fear, but his mien proclaimed the Satanic possession of an evil exultation. Before Mybaloë could question or address him, he began to pour forth a torrent of dreadful mouthings, intermingled with maledictions and vituperations. He told us how he had prepared the poison, he enumerated the fearsome ingredients, the slowly chanted and lethiferous runes, the manifold and mighty power of the baleful fetishes that had gone into or had helped in its making. Then he described the action of the poison, the preliminary months during which Mybaloë and I would suffer innumerable pangs, would die uncounted deaths in our anticipation of the deferred agonies to come; and then the interminable tortures themselves, the slow and hideous contraction of all our fibers, all our organs, the drying-up of the very sources of life, and the shrinkage to infantile, or even pre-infantile, stature and dimensions before the relief of death. Forgetful of all but his mad hatred, his insensate jealousy, he lingered over these details, he repeated them again and again with so vile a gloating, so horrible and rapturous a relish, that a sort of paralyzing spell was laid upon the assembly, and no one stepped forward to silence him with a knife or a spear.

At last, while his mouthings continued, Mybaloë filled another cup with the poisoned wine; and while the priests held Mergawe and forced his teeth apart with their spear-blades, she poured the wine down his throat. Oblivious or contemptuous of his doom, he betrayed no slightest quiver or shrinking of fear, but like a black fiend who rejoices over the damned, even though he himself is numbered among them. Marvasi was also compelled to

drink the wine, and he cringed and cried with terror, frothing at the mouth when the lethal liquor touched his tongue. Then the two men, by Mybaloë's order, were led away and imprisoned, and were left under a strong guard to await the working of the poison. But later in the night, when their deed became known to the populace, a multitude of men and women, maddened beyond all measure or control, broke in and overpowered the guards and carried Marvasi and Mergawe to the grotto behind the cave of Wanaô's, where they were flung like offal to the crocodiles in the black pool.

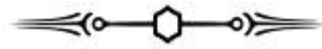
Now, for Mybaloë and me, there began a life of inde pictable horror. Dead was all our former joy and happiness, for the blackness of the doom to come lay on us like the charnel shadow cast by the gathering of myriad vultures. Love, it is true, was still ours, but love that already seemed to have entered the hideous gloom and nothingness of the grave... But of these things I can not tell you, though I have told you so much... They were too sacred and too terrible...

After the leaden lapse of funereal days, beneath heavens from which for us the very azure had now departed, it was agreed between Mybaloë and me that I should leave Azombeii and return to my native land. Neither of us could bear the thought of having to witness day by day the eventual torments and progressive physical disintegration of the other when Mergawe's poison began to operate. Of our farewell meeting, I can say only that it was infinitely sorrowful, and that I shall remember the love and grief in Mybaloë's eyes amid the culminative pangs and disordered illusions of my last delirium. Before I left, she gave me for a keepsake the little image of Wanaô's, concerning which you have asked me so often.

It is needless to detail my return to America. Now, after months of a delay that has had in it nothing of mercy or mitigation, I feel the first workings of the poison; I have recognized all its preliminary symptoms, and

the sickening expectations of haunted days and sleep-forbidden nights are being realized. And knowing ill that is yet to come, and seeing with a clarity of imaginative vision that sears my soul the coincidental agonies of Mybaloë, I have begun to envy the death of Marvasi and Mergawe in the pool of crocodiles.

The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake



“NO, AS I’VE told you fellows before, I haven’t a red cent’s worth of faith in the supernatural.”

The speaker was Arthur Avilton, whose tales of the ghostly and macabre had often been compared to Poe, Bierce and Machen. He was a master of imaginative horrors, with a command of diabolically convincing details, of monstrous cobweb suggestions that had often laid a singular spell on the minds of readers who were not ordinarily attracted or impressed by literature of that type. It was his own boast, often made, that all his effects were secured in a purely ratiocinative, even scientific manner, by playing on the element of subconscious dread, the ancestral superstition latent in most human beings; but he claimed that he himself was utterly incredulous of anything occult or fantasmal, and that he had never in his life known the slightest tremor of fear concerning such things.

Avilton’s listeners looked at him a little questioningly. They were John Godfrey, a young landscape painter, and Emil Schuler, a rich dilettante, who played in alternation with literature and music, but was not serious in his attentions to either. Both were old friends and admirers of Avilton, at whose house on Sutter Street, in San Francisco, they had met by chance that afternoon. Avilton had suspended work on a new story to chat with them and smoke a sociable pipe. He still sat at his writing-table, with a pile of neatly written foolscap before him. His appearance was as normal and non-eccentric as his handwriting, and he might have been a lawyer or doctor or chemist, rather than a concocter of bizarre fiction. The room, his library, was quite luxurious, in sober, gentlemanly sort of fashion, and there was

little of the outré in its furnishings. The only unusual notes were struck by two heavy brass candlesticks on his table wrought in the form of rearing serpents, and a stuffed rattlesnake that was coiled on top of one of the low bookcases.

“Well,” observed Godfrey, “if anything could convince me of the reality of the supernatural, it would be some of your stories, Avilton. I always read them by broad daylight-I wouldn’t do it after dark on a bet... By the way, what’s the yarn you are working on now?”

“It’s about a stuffed serpent that suddenly comes to life,” replied Avilton. “I’m calling it *The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake*. I got the idea while I was looking at my rattler this morning.”

“And I suppose you’ll sit here by candlelight tonight,” put in Schuler, “and go on with your cheerful little horror without turning a hair” It was well known that Avilton did much of his writing at night.

Avilton smiled. “Darkness always helps me to concentrate. And, considering that so much of the action in my tales is nocturnal, the time is not inappropriate.”

“You’re welcome,” said Schuler, in a jocular tone. He arose to go, and Godfrey also found that it was time to depart.

“Oh, by the way,” said their host, “I’m planning a little week-end party. Would you fellows care to come over next Saturday evening? There’ll be two or three others of our friends. I’ll have this story off my chest by then, and we’ll raise the roof.”

Godfrey and Schuler accepted the invitation, and went out together. Since they both lived across the bay, in Oakland, and both were on their way home, they caught the same car to the ferry.

“Old Avilton is certainly a case of the living contradiction, if there ever was one,” remarked Schuler. “Of course, no one quite believes in the occult

or the necromantic nowadays; but anyone who can cook up such infernally realistic horrors, such thoroughgoing hair-frizzlers as he does, simply hasn't the right to be so cold-blooded about it. I claim that it's really indecent."

"I agree," rejoined his companion. "He's so damnably matter-of-fact that he arouses in me a sort of Hallowe'en impulse: I want to dress up in an old sheet and play ghost or something, just to jar him out of that skeptical complacency of his."

"Ye gods and little ghosties!" cried Schuler. "I've got an inspiration. Remember what Avilton told us about the new story he's writing about the serpent that comes to life?"

He unfolded the prankish idea he had conceived, and the two laughed like mischievous schoolboys plotting some novel deviltry.

"Why not? It should give the old lad a real thrill," chuckled Godfrey. "And he'll think that his fictions are more scientific than he ever dreamed before."

"I know where I can get one," said Schuler. "I'll put it in a fishing-creel, and hide the creel in my valise next Saturday when we go to Avilton's. Then we can watch our chance to make the substitution."

On Saturday evening the two friends arrived together at Avilton's house, and were admitted by a Japanese who combined in himself the roles of cook, butler, housekeeper and valet. The other guests, two young musicians, had already come, and Avilton, who was evidently in a mood for relaxation, was telling them a story, which, to judge from the continual interruptions of laughter, was not at all in the vein for which he had grown so famous. It seemed almost impossible to believe that he could be the author of the gruesome and brain-freezing horrors that bore his name.

The evening went successfully, with a good dinner, cards, and some pre-war Bourbon, and it was after midnight when Avilton saw his guests to their

chambers, and sought his own.

Godfrey and Sailer did not go to bed, but sat up talking in the room they occupied together, till the house had grown silent and it was probable that everyone had fallen asleep. Avilton, they knew, was a sound sleeper, who boasted that even a rivet-factory or a brass orchestra could not keep him awake for five minutes after his head had touched the pillow.

“Now’s our chance,” whispered Schuler, at last. He had taken from his valise a fishing-creel, in which was a large and somewhat restless gopher-snake, and softly opening the door, which they had left ajar, the conspirators tiptoed down the hail toward Avilton’s library, which lay at the farther end. It was their plan to leave the live gopher-snake in the library in lieu of the stuffed rattler, which they would remove. A gopher-snake is somewhat similar to a rattler in its markings; and, in order to complete the verisimilitude, Schuler had even provided himself with a set of rattlers, which he meant to attach with thread to the serpent’s tail before freeing it. The substitution, they felt, would undoubtedly prove a trifle startling, even to a person of such boiler-plate nerves and unrelenting skepticism as Avilton.

As if to facilitate their scheme, the door of the library stood half open. Godfrey produced a flashlight, and they entered. Somehow, in spite of their merry mood, in spite of the schoolboy hoax they had planned and the Bourbon they had drunk, the shadow of something dim and sinister and disquieting fell on the two men as they crossed the threshold. It was like a premonition of some unknown and unexpected menace, lurking in the darkness of the book-peopled room where Avilton had woven so many of his weird and spectral webs. They both began to remember incidents of nocturnal horror from his stories-happenings that were ghoulishly hideous or necromantically strange and terrible. Now, such things seemed even

more plausible than the author's diabolic art had made them heretofore. But neither of the men could have quite defined the feeling that came over them or could have assigned a reason for it.

"I feel a little creepy," confided Schuler, as they stood in the dark library. "Turn on that flashlight, won't you?"

The light fell directly on the low bookcase where the stuffed rattler had been coiled, but to their surprise, they found the serpent missing From its customary place.

"Where is the damned thing, anyway ?" muttered Godfrey. He turned his light on the neighboring bookcases, and then on the floor and chairs in front of them, but without revealing the object of his search. At last, in its circlings, the ray struck Avilton's writing-table, and they saw the snake, which, in some mood of grotesque humor, Avilton had evidently placed on his pile of manuscript to serve in lieu of a paperweight. Behind it gleamed the two serpentine candlesticks.

"Ah! there you are," said Schuler. He was about to open his creel when a singular and quite unforeseen thing occurred. He and Godfrey both saw a movement on the writing-table, and before their incredulous eyes the rattlesnake coiled on the pile of paper slowly raised its arrow-shaped head and darted forth its forky tongue! Its cold, unwinking eyes, with a fixation of baleful intensity well-nigh hypnotic, were upon the intruders, and as they stared in unbelieving horror, they heard the sharp rattling of its tail, like withered seeds in a wind-swung pod.

"My God !" exclaimed Schuler. "The thing is alive !"

As he spoke, the flashlight fell from Godfrey's hand and went out, leaving them in soot-black darkness. As they stood for a moment, half petrified with astonishment and terror, they heard the rattling again, and then the sound of some object that seemed to strike the floor in falling.

Once more, in a few instants, there came the sharp rattle, this time almost at their very feet.

Godfrey screamed aloud, and Schuler began to curse incoherently, as they both turned and ran toward the open door. Schuler was ahead, and as he crossed the threshold into the dim-lit hall, where one electric bulb still burned, he heard the crash of his companion's fall, mingled with a cry of such infinite terror, such atrocious agony, that his brain and his very marrow were turned to ice. In the paralyzing panic that overtook him, Schuler retained no faculty except that of locomotion, and it did not even occur to him that it would be possible to stop and ascertain what had befallen Godfrey. He had no thought, no desire, except to put the length of the hall between himself and that accursed library and its happenings.

Avilton, dressed in pyjamas, stood at the door of his room. He had been aroused by Godfrey's scream of terror.

"What's the matter?" the story-writer queried, with a look of amiable surprise, which turned to a real gravity when he saw Schuler's face. Schuler was as white as a marble headstone and his eyes were preternaturally dilated.

"The snake!" Schuler gasped. "The snake! The snake! Something awful has happened to Godfrey-he fell with the thing just behind him."

"What snake? You don't mean my stuffed rattler by any chance, do you?"

"Stuffed rattler?" yelled Schuler. "The damned thing is alive! It came crawling after us, rattling under our very feet a moment ago. Then Godfrey stumbled and fell-and he didn't get up."

"I don't understand," purred Avilton. "The thing is a manifest impossibility-really quite contrary to all natural laws, I assure you. I killed

that snake four years ago, in El Dorado County, and had it stuffed by an expert taxidermist.”

“Go and see for yourself,” challenged Schuler.

Avilton strode immediately to the library and turned on the lights. Schuler, mastering a little his panic and his dreadful forebodings, followed at a cautious distance. He found Avilton stooping over the body of Godfrey, who lay quite still in a huddled and horribly contorted position near the door. Not far away was the abandoned fishing-creel. The stuffed rattlesnake was coiled in its customary place on top of the bookshelves.

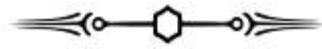
Avilton, with a grave and brooding mien, removed his hand from Godfrey’s heart, and observed:

“He’s quite dead-shock and heart-failure, I should think.”

Neither he nor Schuler could bear to look very long at Godfrey’s up turned face, on which was stamped, as with some awful brand or acid, an expression of fear and suffering beyond all human capacity to endure. In their mutual desire to avoid the lidless horror of his dead staring, their eyes fell at the same instant on his right hand, which was clenched in a hideous rigidity and drawn close to his side.

Neither could utter a word when they saw the thing that protruded from between Godfrey’s fingers. It was a bunch of rattles, and on the endmost one, where it had evidently been torn from the viper’s tail, there clung several shreds of raw and bloody flesh.

The Supernumerary Corpse



IT IS NOT remorse that maddens me, that drives me to the penning of this more than indiscreet narrative, in the hope of finding a temporary distraction. I have felt no remorse for a crime to which justice itself impelled me. It is the damnable mystery, beyond all human reason or solution, upon which I have stumbled in the doing of this simple deed, in the mere execution of the justice whereof I speak-it is this that has brought me near insanity.

My motives in the killing of Jasper Trilt, though imperative, were far from extraordinary. He had wronged me enough, in the course of a twelve years' acquaintance, to warrant his death twice over. He had robbed me of the painfully garnered fruits of a lifetime of labor and research, had stolen, with lying promises, the chemical formulae that would have made me a wealthy man. Foolishly, I had trusted him, believing that he would share with me the profits of my precious knowledge-from which he was to acquire riches and renown. Poor and unknown, I could do nothing for my own redress.

Often I marvel at the long forbearance which I displayed toward Trilt. Something (was it the thought of ultimate revenge?) led me to ignore his betrayals, to dissemble my knowledge of his baseness. I continued to use the laboratory which he had equipped for me. I went on accepting the miserable pittance which he paid me for my toil. I made new discoveries-and I allowed him to cheat me of the usufruct.

Moreover, there was Norma Gresham, whom I had always loved in my halting, inarticulate fashion, and who had seemed to like me well enough

before Trilt began to pay her his dashing and gallant addresses. She had speedily forgotten the timid, poverty-stricken chemist, and had married Trilt. This, too, I pretended to ignore, but I could not forget.

As you see, my grievances were such as have actuated many others in the seeking of vengeance: they were in no sense unusual; and like everything else about the affair, they served by their very commonplaceness to throw into monstrous relief the abnormal and inexplicable outcome.

I cannot remember when it was that I first conceived the idea of killing my betrayer. It has been so long an integral part of my mental equipment, that I seem to have nurtured it from all pre-eternity. But the full maturing, the perfection of my murderous plans, is a thing of quite recent date.

For years, apart from my usual work, I have been experimenting with poisons. I delved in the remote arcana and by-ways of toxicology, I learned all that chemistry could tell me on the subject-and more. This branch of my research was wholly unknown to Trilt; and I did not intend that he should profit by anything that I had discovered or devised in the course of my investigations. In fact, my aims were quite different, in regard to him.

From the beginning, I had in mind certain peculiar requisites, which no poison familiar to science could fulfil. It was after endless groping and many failures that I succeeded in formulating a compound of rare toxic agents which would have the desired effect on the human system.

It was necessary, for my own security, that the poison should leave no trace, and should imitate closely the effects of some well-known malady, thus precluding even the chance of medical suspicion. Also, the victim must not die too quickly and mercifully. I devised a compound which, if taken internally, would be completely absorbed by the nervous system within an hour and would thereafter be undetectable through analysis. It would cause an immediate paralysis, and would present all the outward effects of a

sudden and lethal stroke of apoplexy. However, the afflicted person — though seemingly insensible-would retain consciousness and would not die till the final absorption of the poison. Though utterly powerless to speak or move, he would still be able to hear and see, to understand-and suffer.

Even after I had perfected this agent, and had satisfied myself of its efficacy, I delayed the crowning trial. It was not through fear or compunction that I waited: rather, it was because I desired to prolong the delicious joys of anticipation, the feeling of power it gave me to know that I could sentence my betrayer to his doom and could execute the sentence at will.

It was after many months-it was less than a fortnight ago-that I decided to withhold my vengeance no longer. I planned it all very carefully, with complete forethought; and I left no loophole for mischance or accident. There would be nothing, not even the most tenuous thread, that could ever lead any one to suspect me.

To arouse the cupidity of Trilt, and to insure his profound interest, I went to him and hinted that I was on the brink of a great discovery. I did not specify its nature, saying that I should reveal it all at the proper time, when success had been achieved. I did not invite him to visit the laboratory. Cunningly, by oblique hints, I stimulated his curiosity; and I knew that he would come. Perhaps my caution was excessive; but it must not even seem that I had prearranged the visit that would terminate in his seizure and death. I could, perhaps, have found opportunity to administer the poison in his own home, where I was still a fairly frequent caller. But I wished him to die in my presence and in the laboratory that had been the scene of my long, defrauded toils.

I knew, by a sort of prescience, the very evening when he would come, greedy to unearth my new secret. I prepared the draft that contained the

poison-a chemist's glass of water colored with a little grenadine-and set it aside in readiness among my tubes and bottles. Then I waited.

The laboratory-an old and shabby mansion, converted by Trilt to this purpose-lay in a well-wooded outskirt of the town, at no great distance from my employer's luxurious home. Trilt was a gourmand; and I knew that he would not arrive till well after the dinner hour. Therefore I looked for him about nine o'clock. He must indeed have been eager to filch my supposed new formula; for, half an hour before the expected time, I heard his heavy, insolent knock on the door of the rear room in which I was waiting amid my chemical apparatus.

He came in, gross and odious, with the purple overfeeding upon his puffy jowls. He wore an azure blue tie and a suit of pepper-and-salt-a close-fitting suit that merely emphasized the repulsive bulkiness of his figure.

Well, Margrave, what is it now ?" he asked. "Have you finished the experiments you were hinting about so mysteriously? I hope you've really done something to earn your pay, this time."

"I have made a tremendous discovery," I told him, "nothing less than the elixir of the alchemists-the draft of eternal life and energy."

He was palpably startled, and gave me a sharp, incredulous stare.

'You are lying," he said, "or fooling yourself. Everyone knows, and has known since the Dark Ages, that the thing is a scientific impossibility."

"Others may lie," I said sardonically, "but it remains to be seen whether or not I have lied. That graduated glass which you see on the table is filled with the elixir."

He stared at the vessel which I had indicated.

"It looks like grenadine," he remarked, with a certain perspicacity. "There is a superficial likeness-the color is the same... But the stuff means immortality for any one who dares to drink it-also it means inexhaustible

capacity for pleasure, a freedom from all satiety or weariness. It is everlasting life and joy.”

He listened greedily. “Have you tried it yourself?”

“Yes, I have experimented with it,” I countered.

He gave me a somewhat contemptuous and doubtful glance. “Well, you do look rather animated tonight-at least, more so than usual-and no so much like a mackerel that’s gotten soured on life. The stuff hasn’t killed you, at any rate. So I think I’ll try it myself. It ought to be a pretty good commercial proposition, if it only does a tenth of what you say it will. We’ll call it Trilt’s Elixir”

“Yes,” said I, slowly, echoing him: “Trilt’s Elixir.”

He reached for the glass and raised it to his lips.

“You guarantee the result ?” he asked.

“The result will be all that one could desire,” I promised, looking him full in the eyes, and smiling with an irony which he could not perceive.

He drained the glass at a gulp. Instantly, as I had calculated, the poison took effect. He staggered as if he had received a sudden, crushing blow, the empty vessel fell from his fingers with a crash, his heavy legs collapsed beneath him, he fell on the laboratory floor between the laden benches and tables, and lay without stirring again. His face was flushed and congested, his breathing stertorous, as in the malady whose effects I had chosen to simulate. His eyes were open-horribly open and glaring; but there was not even the least flicker of their lids.

Coolly, but with a wild exultation in my heart, I gathered up the fragments of the broken glass and dropped them into the small heating-stove that stood at the room’s end. Then, returning to the fallen and helpless man, I allowed myself the luxury of gloating over the dark, unutterable terror which I read in his paralytic gaze. Knowing that he could still hear

and comprehend, I told him what I had done and listed the unforgotten wrongs which he thought I had accepted so supinely.

Then, as an added torture, I emphasized the undetectable nature of the poison, and I taunted him for his own folly in drinking the supposed elixir. All too quickly did the hour pass-the hour which I had allowed for the full absorption of the poison and the victim's death. The breathing of Trilt grew slower and fainter, his pulse faltered and became inaudible; and at last he lay dead. But the terror still appeared to dwell, dark and stagnant and nameless, in his ever-open eyes.

Now, as was part of my carefully laid plan, I went to the laboratory telephone. I intended to make two calls-one, to tell Norma, Trilt's wife, of his sudden and fatal seizure while visiting me-and the other, to summon a doctor.

For some indefinable reason, I called Norma first-and the outcome of our conversation was so bewildering, so utterly staggering, that I did not put in the second call.

Norma answered the telephone herself, as I had expected. Before I could frame the few short words that would inform her of Trilt's death, she cried out in a shaken, tremulous voice:

"I was just going to call you, Felton. Jasper died a few minutes ago, from an apoplectic stroke. It's all so terrible, and I am stunned by the shock. He came into the house about an hour ago, and dropped at my feet without saying a word... I thought he had gone to see you-but he could hardly have done that and gotten back so quickly. Come at once, Felton."

The dumbfoundment which I felt was inexpressible. I think I must have stammered a little as I answered her:

"Are you sure-quite sure that it's Jasper?"

“Of course, it’s incredible. But he is lying here on the library sofa-bed. I called a doctor when he was stricken; and the doctor is still here. But there is nothing more to be done.”

It was impossible then for me to tell her, as I had intended-that Trilt had come to the laboratory-that his dead body was lying near me in the rear room at that moment. Indeed, I doubted my own senses, doubted my very brain, as I hung up the telephone. Either I, or Norma was the victim of some strange and unaccountable delusion.

Half expecting that the gross cadaver would have vanished like an apparition, I turned from the telephone-and saw it, supine and heavy, with stiffening limbs and features. I went over, I stooped above it and dug my fingers roughly into the flabby flesh to make sure that it was real-that Trilt’s visit and the administering of the poison had not been a mere hallucination. It was Trilt himself who lay before me; no one could mistake the obese body, the sybaritic face and lips, even with the chill of death descending upon them. The corpse I had touched was all too solid and substantial.

It must be Norma, then, who was demented or dreaming, or who had made some incredible mistake. I should go to the house at once and learn the true explanation. There would be time enough afterward to do my own explaining.

There was no likelihood that any one would enter the laboratory in my absence. Indeed, there were few visitors at any time. With one backward look at the body, to assure myself anew of its materiality, I went out into the moonless evening and started toward my employer’s residence.

I have no clear recollection of the short walk among shadowy trees and bushes and along the poorly litten streets with their scattered houses. My thoughts, as well as the external world, were a night-bound maze of baffling unreality and dubiety.

Into this mare I was plunged to an irremeable depth on my arrival. Norma, pale and stunned rather than grief-stricken (for I think she had long ceased to love Trilt), was at the door to meet me.

“I can’t get over the suddenness of it,” she said at once. “He seemed all right at dinnertime, and ate heartily, as usual. Afterward he went out, saying that he would walk as far as the laboratory and look in on you.”

“He must have felt ill, and started back after he had gone halfway. I didn’t even hear him come in. I can’t understand how he entered the house so quietly. I was sitting in the library, reading, when I happened to look up, just in time to see him cross the room and fall senseless at my feet. He never spoke or moved after that.”

I could say nothing as she led me to the library. I do not know what I had expected to find; but certainly no sane man, no modern scientist and chemist, could have dreamed of what I saw—the body of Jasper Trilt, reposing still and stiff and cadaverous on the sofa: the same corpse, to all outward seeming, which I had left behind me in the laboratory!

The doctor, Trilt’s family physician, whom Norma had summoned was about to leave. He greeted me with a slight nod and a cursory, incurious glance.

“There’s nothing whatever to be done,” he said, “it’s all over.”

“But-it doesn’t seem possible,” I stammered. “Is it really Jasper Trilt—isn’t there some mistake?”

The doctor did not seem to hear my question. With reeling senses doubting my own existence, I went over to the sofa and examined the body, touching it several times to make sure — if assurance were possible — of its substantiality. The puffy, purplish features, the open, glaring eyes with the glacial terror, the suit of pepper-and-salt, the azure blue tie—all were identical with those I had seen and touched a few minutes previous, in

another place. I could no longer doubt the materiality of the second corpse-I could not deny that the thing before me, to all intents and purposes, was Jasper Trilt. But in the very confirmation of its incredible identity, there lay the inception of a doubt that was infinitely hideous...

A week has gone by since then-a week of unslumbering nightmare, of all-prevailing, ineluctable horror.

Going back to the laboratory, I found the corpse of Jasper Trilt on the floor, where he had fallen. Feverishly, I applied to it all possible tests: it was solid, clammy, gross, material, like the other. I dragged it into a dusty, little-used storeroom, among cobwebby cartons and boxes and bottles, and covered it with sacking.

For reasons that must be more than obvious, I dared not tell any one of its existence. No one, save myself, has ever seen it. No one-not even Norma-suspects the unimaginable truth...

Later, I attended the funeral of Trilt, I saw him in his coffin, and as one of the pall-bearers I helped to carry the coffin and lower it into the grave. I can swear that it was tenanted by an actual body. And on the faces of the morticians and my fellow pall-bearers there was no shadow of doubt or misgiving as to the identity and reality of the corpse. But afterward, returning home, I lifted the sacking in the store-room, and found that the thing beneath-cadaver or *ka, doppelganger* or phantom, whatever it was-had not disappeared or undergone the least change.

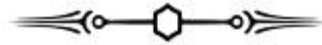
Madness took me then for awhile, and I knew not what I did. Recovering my senses in a measure, I poured gallon after gallon of corrosive acids into a great tub; and in the tub I placed the thing that had been Jasper Trilt, or which bore the semblance of Trilt. But neither the clothing nor the body was affected in any degree by the mordant acid. And since, then, the thing has shown no sign of normal decay, but remains eternally and inexplicably the

same. Some night, before long, I shall bury it in the woods behind the laboratory; and the earth will receive Trilt for the second time. After that my crime will be doubly undetectable-if I have really committed a crime, and have not dreamed it all or become the victim of some hallucinative brain-disease.

I have no explanation for what has happened, nor do I believe that any such can be afforded by the laws of a sane universe. But-is there any proof that the universe itself is sane, or subject to rational laws?

Perhaps there are inconceivable lunacies in chemistry itself, and drugs whose action is a breach of all physical logic. The poison that I administered to Trilt was an unknown quantity, apart from its deadliness, and I cannot be wholly sure of its properties, of its possible effect on the atoms of the human body-and the atoms of the soul. Indeed, I can be sure of nothing, except that I too, like the laws of matter, must go altogether mad in a little while.

The Mandrakes



GILIES GRENIER THE sorcerer and his wife Sabine, coming into lower Averoigne from parts unknown or at least unverified, had selected the location of their hut with a careful forethought.

The hut was close to those marshes through which the slackening waters of the river Isoile, after leaving the great forest, had overflowed in sluggish, reed-clogged channels and sedge-hidden pools mantled with scum like witches' oils. It stood among osiers and alders on a low, mound-shaped elevation; and in front, toward the marshes, there was a loamy meadow-bottom where the short fat stems and tufted leaves of the mandrake grew in lush abundance, being more plentiful and of greater size than elsewhere through all that sorcery-ridden province. The fleshly, bifurcated roots of this plant, held by many to resemble the human body, were used by Gilles and Sabine in the brewing of love-philtres. Their potions, being compounded with much care and cunning, soon acquired a marvelous renown among the peasants and villagers, and were even in request among people of a loftier station, who came privily to the wizard's hut. They would rouse, people said, a kindly warmth in the coldest and most prudent bosom, would melt the armor of the most obdurate virtue. As a result, the demand for these sovereign magistrals became enormous.

The couple dealt also in other drugs and simples, in charms and divination; and Gilles, according to common belief, could read infallibly the dictates of the stars. Oddly enough, considering the temper of the Fifteenth Century, when magic and witchcraft were still so widely reprobated, he and

his wife enjoyed a repute by no means ill or unsavory. No charges of malefice were brought against them; and because of the number of honest marriages promoted by the philtres, the local clergy were content to disregard the many illicit amours that had come to a successful issue through the same agency.

It is true, there were those who looked askance at Gilles in the beginning, and who whispered fearfully that he had been driven out of Blois, where all persons bearing the name Grenier were popularly believed to be werewolves. They called attention to the excessive hairiness of the wizard, whose hands were black with bristles and whose beard grew almost to his eyes. Such insinuations, however, were generally considered as lacking proof, insomuch as no other signs or marks of lycanthropy were ever displayed by Gilles. And in time, for reasons that have been sufficiently indicated, the few detractors of Gilles were wholly overborne by a secret but widespread sentiment of public favor.

Even by their patrons, very little was known regarding the strange couple, who maintained the reserve proper to those who dealt in mystery and enchantment. Sabine, a comely woman with blue-gray eyes and wheat-colored hair, and no trace of the traditional witch in her appearance, was obviously much younger than Gilles, whose sable mane and beard were already touched with the white warp of time. It was rumored by visitors that she had oftentimes been overheard in sharp dispute with her husband; and people soon made a jest of this, remarking that the philtres might well be put to a domestic use by those who purveyed them. But aside from such rumors and ribaldries, little was thought of the matter. The connubial infelicities of Gilles and his wife, whether grave or trivial, in no wise impaired the renown of their love-potions.

Also, little was thought of Sabine's presence, when, five years after the coming of the pair into Averroigne, it became remarked by neighbors and customers that Gilles was alone. In reply to queries, the sorcerer merely said that his spouse had departed on a long journey, to visit relatives in a remote province. The explanation was accepted without debate, and it did not occur to any one that there had been no eye-witnesses of Sabine's departure.

It was then mid-autumn; and Gilles told the inquirers, in a somewhat vague and indirect fashion, that his wife would not return before spring. Winter came early that year and tarried late, with deeply crusted snows in the forest and on the uplands, and a heavy armor of fretted ice on the marshes. It was a winter of much hardship and privation. When the tardy spring had broken the silver buds of the willows and covered the alders with a foliage of chrysolite, few thought to ask Gilles regarding Sabine's return. And later, when the purple bells of the mandrake were succeeded by small orange-colored apples, her prolonged absence was taken for granted.

Gilles, living tranquilly with his books and cauldrons, and gathering the roots and herbs for his magical medicaments, was well enough pleased to have it taken for granted. He did not believe that Sabine would ever return; and his unbelief, it would seem, was far from irrational. He had killed her one evening in autumn, during a dispute of unbearable acrimony, slitting her soft, pale throat in self-defense with a knife which he had wrested from her fingers when she lifted it against him. Afterward he had buried her by the late rays of a gibbous moon beneath the mandrakes in the meadow-bottom, replacing the leafy sods with much care, so that there was no evidence of their having been disturbed other than by the digging of a few roots in the way of daily business.

After the melting of the long snows from the meadow, he himself could scarcely have been altogether sure of the spot in which he had interred her

body. He noticed, however, as the season drew on, that there was a place where the mandrakes grew with even more than their wonted exuberance; and this place, he believed, was the very site of her grave. Visiting it often, he smiled with a secret irony, and was pleased rather than troubled by the thought of that charnel nourishment which might have contributed to the lushness of the dark, glossy leaves. In fact, it may well have been a similar irony that had led him to choose the mandrake meadow as a place of burial for the murdered witch-wife.

Gilles Grenier was not sorry that he had killed Sabine. They had been ill-mated from the beginning, and the woman had shown toward him in their quotidian quarrels the venomous spitefulness of a very hell-cat. He had not loved the vixen; and it was far pleasanter to be alone, with his somewhat somber temper unruffled by her acrid speeches, and his sallow face and grizzling beard untorn by her sharp finger-nails.

With the renewal of spring, as the sorcerer had expected, there was much demand for his love-philtres among the smitten swains and lasses of the neighborhood. There came to him, also, the gallants who sought to overcome a stubborn chastity, and the wives who wished to recall a wandering fancy or allure the forbidden desires of young men. Anon, it became necessary for Gilles to replenish his stock of mandrake potions; and with this purpose in mind, he went forth at midnight beneath the full May moon, to dig the newly grown roots from which he would brew his amatory enchantments.

Smiling darkly beneath his beard, he began to cull the great, moon-pale plants which flourished on Sabine's grave, digging out the homunculus-like taproots very carefully with a curious trowel made from the femur of a witch.

Though he was well used to the weird and often vaguely human forms assumed by the mandrake, Gilles was somewhat surprised by the appearance of the first root. It seemed inordinately large, unnaturally white; and, eyeing it more closely, he saw that it bore the exact likeness of a woman's body and lower limbs, being cloven to the middle and clearly formed even to the ten toes! These were no arms, however, and the bosom ended in the large tuft of ovate leaves.

Gilles was more than startled by the fashion in which the root seemed to turn and writhe when he lifted it from the ground. He dropped it hastily, and the minikin limbs lay quivering on the grass. But, after a little reflection, he took the prodigy as a possible mark of Satanic favor, and continued his digging. To his amazement, the next root was formed in much the same manner as the first. A half-dozen more, which he proceeded to dig, were shaped in miniature mockery of a woman from breasts to heels; and amid the superstitious awe and wonder with which he regarded them, he became aware of their singularly intimate resemblance to Sabine.

At this discovery, Gilles was deeply perturbed, for the thing was beyond his comprehension. The miracle, whether divine or demoniac, began to assume a sinister and doubtful aspect. It was as if the slain woman herself had returned, or had somehow wrought her unholy simulacrum in the mandrakes.

His hand trembled as he started to dig up another plant; and working with less than his usual care, he failed to remove the whole of the bifurcated root, cutting into it clumsily with the trowel of sharp bone.

He saw that he had severed one of the tiny ankles. At the same instant, a shrill, reproachful cry, like the voice of Sabine herself in mingled pain and anger, seemed to pierce his ears with intolerable acuity, though the volume was strangely lessened, as if the voice had come from a distance. The cry

ceased, and was not repeated. Gilles, sorely terrified, found himself staring at the trowel, on which there was a dark, blood-like stain. Trembling, he pulled out the severed root, and saw that it was dripping with a sanguine fluid.

At first, in his dark fear and half-guilty apprehension he thought of burying the roots which lay palely before him with their eldritch and obscene similitude to the dead sorceress. He would hide them deeply from his own sight and the ken of others, lest the murder he had done should somehow be suspected.

Presently, however, his alarm began to lessen. It occurred to him that, even if seen by others, the roots would be looked upon merely as a freak of nature and would in no manner serve to betray his crime, since their actual resemblance to the person of Sabine was a thing which none but he could rightfully know.

Also, he thought, the roots might well possess an extraordinary virtue, and from them, perhaps, he would brew philtres of never-equalled power and efficacy. Overcoming entirely his initial dread and repulsion, he filled a small osier basket with the quivering, leaf-headed figurines. Then he went back to his hut, seeing in the bizarre phenomenon merely the curious advantage to which it might be turned, and wholly oblivious to any darker meaning, such as might have been read by others in his place.

In his callous hardihood, he was not disquieted overmuch by the profuse bleeding of a sanguine matter from the mandrakes when he came to prepare them for his cauldron. The ungodly, furious hissing, the mad foaming and boiling of the brew, like a devil's broth, he ascribed to the unique potency of its ingredients. He even dared to choose the most shapely and perfect of the woman-like plants, and hung it up in his hut amid other roots and dried

herbs and simples, intending to consult it as an oracle in future, according to the custom of wizards.

The new philtres which he had concocted were bought by eager customers, and Gilles ventured to recommend them for their surpassing virtue, which would kindle amorous warmth in a bosom of marble or enflame the very dead.

Now, in the old legend of Averoigne which I recount herewith, it is told that the impious and audacious wizard, fearing neither God nor devil nor witch-woman, dared to dig again in the earth of Sabine's grave, removing many more of the white, female-shapen roots, which cried aloud in shrill complaint to the waning moon or turned like living limbs at his violence. And all those which he dug were formed alike, in the miniature image of the dead Sabine from breasts to toes. And from them, it is said, he compounded other philtres, which he meant to sell in time when such should be requested.

As it happened, however, these latter potions were never dispensed; and only a few of the first were sold, owing to the frightful and calamitous consequences that followed their use. For those to whom the potions had been administered privily, whether men or women, were not moved by the genial fury of desire, as was the wonted result, but were driven by a darker rage, by a woful and Satanic madness, irresistibly impelling them to harm or even slay the persons who had sought to attract their love.

Husbands were turned against wives, lasses against their lovers, with speeches of bitter hate and scatheful deeds. A certain young gallant who had gone to the promised rendezvous was met by a vengeful madwoman, who tore his face into bleeding shreds with her nails. A mistress who had thought to win back her recreant knight was mistreated foully and done to death by him who had hitherto been impeccably gentle, even if faithless.

The scandal of these untoward happenings was such as would attend an invasion of demons. The crazed men and women, it was thought at first, were veritably possessed by devils. But when the use of the potions became rumored, and their provenance was clearly established, the burden of the blame fell upon Gilles Grenier, who, by the law of both church and state, was now charged with sorcery.

The constables who went to arrest Gilles found him at evening in his hut of raddled osiers, stooping and muttering above a cauldron that foamed and hissed and boiled as if it had been filled with the spate of Phlegethon. They entered and took him unaware. He submitted calmly, but expressed surprise when told of the lamentable effect of the love-philtres; and he neither affirmed nor denied the charge of wizardry.

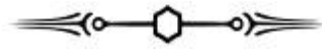
As they were about to leave with their prisoner, the officers heard a shrill, tiny, shrewish voice that cried from the shadows of the hut, where bunches of dried simples and other sorcerous ingredients were hanging. It appeared to issue from a strange, half-withered root, cloven in the very likeness of a woman's body and legs — a root that was partly pale, and partly black with cauldron-smoke. One of the constables thought that he recognized the voice as being that of Sabine, the sorcerer's wife. All swore that they heard the voice clearly, and were able to distinguish these words:

“Dig deeply in the meadow, where the mandrakes grow the thickliest.”

The officers were sorely frightened, both by this uncanny voice and the obscene likeness of the root, which they regarded as a work of Satan. Also, there was much doubt as to the wisdom of obeying the oracular injunction. Gilles, who was questioned narrowly as to its meaning, refused to offer any interpretation; but certain marks of perturbation in his manner finally led the officers to examine the mandrake meadow below the hut.

Digging by lantern-light in the specified spot, they found many more of the roots, which seemed to crowd the ground; and beneath, they came to the rotting corpse of a woman, which was still recognizable as that of Sabine. As a result of this discovery, Gilles Grenier was arraigned not only for sorcery but also for the murder of his wife. He was readily convicted of both crimes, though he denied stoutly the imputation of intentional malefice, and claimed to the very last that he had killed Sabine only in defense of his own life against her termagant fury. He was hanged on the gibbet in company with other murderers, and his dead body was then burned at the stake.

Thirteen Phantasms



“I HAVE BEEN faithful to thee, Cynara, in my fashion.”

John Alvington tried to raise himself on the pillow as he murmured in his thoughts the long-familiar refrain of Dowson's lyric. But his head and shoulders fell back in an overflowing helplessness, and there trickled through his brain, like a thread of icy water, the realization that perhaps the doctor had been right—perhaps the end was indeed imminent. He thought briefly of embalming fluids, immortelles, coffin nails and falling sods; but such ideas were quite alien to his trend of mind, and he preferred to think of Elspeth. He dismissed his mortuary musings with an appropriate shudder.

He often thought of Elspeth, these days. But of course he had never really forgotten her at any time. Many people called him a rake; but he knew, and had always known, that they were wrong. It was said that he had broken, or materially dented, the hearts of twelve women, including those of his two wives; and strangely enough, in view of the exaggerations commonly characteristic of gossip, the number was correct. Yet he, John Alvington, knew to a certainty that only one woman, who no one reckoned among the twelve, had ever really mattered in his life.

He had loved Elspeth and no one else; he had lost her through a boyish quarrel which was never made up, and she had died a year later. The other women were all mistakes, mirages: they had attracted him only because he fancied, for varying periods, that he had found in them something of Elspeth. He had been cruel to them perhaps, and most certainly he had not been faithful. But in forsaking them, had he not been all the truer to Elspeth?

Somehow his mental image of her was more distinct today than in years. As if a gathering dust had been wiped away from a portrait, he saw with strange clearness the elfin teasing of her eyes and the light tossing of brown curls that always accompanied her puckish laughter. She was tall-unexpectedly tall for so fairy-like a person, but all the more admirable thereby; and he had never liked any but tall women.

How often he had been startled, as if by a ghost, in meeting some women with a similar mannerism, a similar figure or expression of eyes or cadence of voice; and how complete had been his disillusionment when he came to see the unreality and fallaciousness of the resemblance. How irreparably she, the true love, had come sooner or later between him and all the others.

He began to recall things that he had almost forgotten, such as the carnelian cameo brooch she had worn on the day of their first meeting, and a tiny mole on her left shoulder, of which he had once had a glimpse when she was wearing a dress unusually low-necked for that period. He remembered too the plain gown of pale green that clung so deliciously to her slender form on that morning when he had flung away with a curt good-bye, never to see her again...

Never, he thought to himself, had his memory been so good: surely the doctor was mistaken, for there was no failing of his faculties. It was quite impossible that he should be mortally ill, when he could summon all his recollections of Elspeth with such ease and clarity.

Now he went over all the days of their seven months' engagement, which might have ended in a felicitous marriage if it had not been for her propensity to take unreasonable offense, and for his own answering flash of temper and want of conciliatory tactics in the crucial quarrel. How near, how poignant it all seemed. He wondered what malign providence had

ordered their parting and had sent him on a vain quest from face to illusory face for the remainder of his life.

He did not, could not remember the other women-only that he had somehow dreamed for a little while that they resembled Elspeth. Others might consider him a Don Juhl: but he knew himself for a hopeless sentimentalist, if there ever had been one.

What was that sound? he wondered. Had someone opened the door of the room? It must be the nurse, for no one else ever came at that hour in the evening. The nurse was a nice girl, though not at all like Elspeth. He tried to turn a little so that he could see her, and somehow succeeded, by a titanic effort altogether disproportionate to the feeble movement.

It was not the nurse after all, for she was always dressed in immaculate white befitting her profession. This woman wore a dress of cool, delectable green, pale as the green of shoaling sea-water. He could not see her face, for she stood with back turned to the bed; but there was something oddly familiar in that dress, something that he could not quite remember at first. Then, with a distinct shock, he knew that it resembled the dress worn by Elspeth on the day of their quarrel, the same dress he had been picturing to himself a little while before. No one ever wore a gown of that length and style nowadays. Who on earth could it be? There was a queer familiarity about her figure, too, for she was quite tall and slender.

The woman turned, and John Alvington saw that it was Elspeth-the very Elspeth from whom he had parted with a bitter farewell, and who had died without ever permitting him to see her again. Yet how could it be but Elspeth, when she had been dead so long? Then, by a swift transition of logic, how could she have ever died, since she was here before him now? It seemed so infinitely preferable to believe that she still lived, and he wanted

so much to speak to her, but his voice failed him when he tried to utter her name.

Now he thought that he heard the door open again, and became aware that another woman stood in the shadows behind Elspeth. She came forward, and he observed that she wore a green dress identical in every detail with that worn by his beloved. She lifted her head-and the face was that of Elspeth, with the same teasing eyes and whimsical mouth! But how could there be two Elspeths?

In profound bewilderment, he tried to accustom himself to the bizarre idea; and even as he wrestled with a problem so unaccountable, a third figure in pale green, followed by a fourth and a fifth came in and stood beside the first two. Nor were these the last, for others entered one by one, till the room was filled with woman, all of whom wore the raiment and the semblance of his dead sweetheart. None of them uttered a word, but all looked at Alvington with a gaze in which he now seemed to discern a deeper mockery than the elfin tantalizing he had once found in the eyes of Elspeth.

He lay very still, fighting with a dark, terrible perplexity. How could there be such a multitude of Elspeths, when he could remember knowing only one? And how many were there, anyway? Something prompted him to count them, and he found that there were thirteen of the specters in green. And having ascertained this fact, he was struck by something familiar about the number? Didn't people say that he had broken the hearts of thirteen women? Or was the total only twelve? Anyway, if you counted Elspeth herself, who had really broken his heart, there would be thirteen.

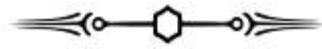
Now all the woman began to toss their curly heads, in a manner he recalled so well, and all of them laughed with a light and puckish laughter.

Could they be laughing at him? Elspeth had often done that but he had loved her devotedly nevertheless...

All at once, he began to feel uncertain about the precise number of figures that filled his room; it seemed to him at one moment that there were more than he had counted, and then that there were fewer. He wondered which one among them was the true Elspeth, for after all he felt sure that there had never been a second-only a series of women apparently resembling her, who were not really like her at all when you came to know them.

Finally, as he tried to count them and scrutinize the thronging faces, all of them grew dim and confused and indistinct, and he half forgot what he was trying to do. Which one was Elspeth? Or had there ever been a real Elspeth? He was not sure of anything at the last, when oblivion came, and he passed to that realm in which there are neither women nor phantoms nor love nor numerical problems.

An Offering to the Moon



“I BELIEVE,” ANNOUNCED Morley, “that the roofless temples of Mu were not all devoted to solar worship, but that many of them were consecrated to the moon. And I am sure that the one we have now discovered proves my point. These hieroglyphics are lunar symbols beyond a doubt.”

Thorway, his fellow-archaeologist, looked at Morley with a surprise not altogether due to the boldly authoritative pronouncement. He was struck anew by the singularity of Morley’s tones and expression. The dreamy, beardless, olive features, that seemed to repeat some aboriginal Aryan type, were transfigured by a look of ecstatic absorption. Thorway himself was not incapable of enthusiasm when the occasion seemed to warrant it; but this well-nigh religious ardor was beyond his comprehension. He wondered (not for the only time) if his companion’s mentality were not a trifle... eccentric.

However, he mumbled a rejoinder that was deferential even though non-committal. Morley had not only financed the expedition, but had been paying a liberal stipend to Thorway for more than two years. So Thorway could afford to be respectful, even though he was a little tired of his employer’s odd and unauthorized notions, and the interminable series of sojourns they had made on Melagesian isles. From the monstrous and primordial stone images of Easter Island to the truncated pyramidal columns of the Ladrones, they had visited all the far-strewn remains which are held to prove the former existence of a great continent in the mid-Pacific. Now, on one of the lesser Marquesas, hitherto unexplored, they had located the massive walls of a large temple-like edifice. As usual, it had been difficult to find, for such places were universally feared and shunned

by the natives, who believed them haunted by the immemorial dead, and could not be hired to visit them or even to reveal their whereabouts. It was Morley who had stumbled upon the place, almost as if he were led by a subconscious instinct.

Truly, they had made a significant discovery, as even Thorway was compelled to admit. Except for a few of the colossal topmost stones, which had fallen or splintered away, the walls were in well-nigh perfect preservation. The place was surrounded by a tangle of palms and jackfruit and various tropical shrubs; but somehow none of them had taken root within the walls. Portions of a paved floor were still extant, amid centurial heaps of rubble. In the center was a huge, square block, rising four feet above the ground-level, which might well have served as an altar. It was carved with rude symbols which appeared to represent the moon in all its digits, and was curiously grooved across the top from the middle to one side with a trough that became deeper toward the edge. Like all other buildings of the sort, it was plain that the temple had never supported a roof.

“Yes, the symbols are undoubtedly lunar,” admitted Thorway.

“Also,” Morley went on, “I believe that rites of human sacrifice were performed in these temples. Oblations of blood were poured not only to the sun but to the moon.”

“The idea is maintainable, of course,” rejoined Thorway. “Human sacrifice was pretty widespread at a certain stage of evolution. It may well have been practiced by the people who built this edifice.”

Morley did not perceive the dryness and formality of his confrere’s assent. He was preoccupied with feelings and ideas, some of which could hardly have been the natural result of his investigations. Even as in visiting many others of the ancient remains, he had been troubled by a nervous agitation which was a compound of irresoluble awe and terror, of nameless,

eager fascination and expectancy. Here, among these mighty walls, the feeling became stronger than it had been anywhere else; and it mounted to a pitch that was veritably distracting, and akin to the disturbed awareness that ushers in the illusions of delirium.

His idea, that the temple was a place of lunar worship, had seized him almost with the authority of an actual recollection, rather than a closely reasoned inference. Also, he was troubled by sensory impressions that bordered upon the hallucinative. Though the day was tropically warm, he was conscious of a strange chill that emanated from the walls — a chill as of bygone cycles; and it seemed to him that the narrow shadows wrought by a meridian sun were peopled with unseen faces. More than once, he was ‘prompted to rub his eyes, for ghostly films of color, like flashes of yellow and purple garments, came and went in the most infinitesimal fraction of time. Though the air was utterly still, he had the sense of perpetual movement all around him, of the passing to and fro of intangible throngs. It was many thousand years, in all likelihood, since human feet had trodden these pavements; but Morley could have cried aloud with the imminence of the longdead ages. It appeared to him, in a brief glimpse, that his whole life, as well as his journeyings and explorations in the South Seas, had been but a devious return to some earlier state of being; and that the resumption of this state was now at hand. All this, however, continued to perplex him mightily: it was as if he had suffered the intrusion of an alien entity.

He heard himself speaking to Thorway, and the words were unfamiliar and remote, as if they had issued from the lips of another.

“They were a joyous and a child-like race, those people of Mu,” he was saying; “but not altogether joyous, not wholly child-like. There was a dark side... and a dark worship — the cult of death and night, personified by the moon, whose white, implacable, frozen lips were appeased only by the

warm blood that flowed upon her altars. They caught the blood in goblets as it ran from the stone grooves... they raised it aloft... and the goblets were swiftly drained in mid-air by the remote goddess, as if the sacrifice had proven acceptable.”

“But how do you know all this?” Thorway was quite amazed, no less by his companion’s air than by the actual words. Morley, he thought, was less like a modern, every-day American than ever. He remembered, inconsequently, how all the natives of the various island groups had taken to Morley with an odd friendliness, without the reserve and suspicion often accorded to other white men. They had even warned Morley against the guardian spirits of the ruins — and they did not always trouble to warn others. It was almost as if they regarded him as being in some manner akin to themselves. Thorway wondered... though he was essentially unimaginative.

“I tell you, I know,” Morley said, as he walked up and down beside the altar. “I have seen...” his voice trailed off in a frozen whisper, and he seemed to stiffen in every limb, and stood still as with some momentary catalepsy. His face grew deadly pale, his eyes were set and staring. Then, from between rigid lips; he uttered the strange words, “Rhalu muvasa than,” in a monotonous, hieratic tone, like a sort of invocation.

Morley could not have told what it was that he felt and saw in that moment. He was no longer his known and wonted self; and the man beside him was an unheeded stranger. But he could remember nothing afterwards — not even the odd vocals he had uttered whatever his mental experience may have been, it was like a dream that fades instantly when one awakens. The moment passed, the extreme rigidity left his limbs and features, and he resumed his interrupted pacing.

His confrere was staring at him in astonishment, not unmingled with solicitude.

“Are you ill? The sun is pretty hot today. And one should be careful. Perhaps we had best return to the schooner.”

Morley gave a mechanical assent and followed Thorway from the ruins towards the seashore, where the schooner they had used in their voyaging was anchored in a little harbor less than a mile distant. His mind was full of confusion and darkness. He no longer felt the queer emotions that had seized him beside the altar, nor could he recall them otherwise than dimly. All the while he was trying to recollect something which lay just below the rim of memory; something very momentous, which he had forgotten long, long ago.

Lying in a cane couch beneath an awning on the schooner's deck, Morley drifted back to his normal plane of consciousness. He was not unwilling to accept Thorway's suggestion, that he had suffered a touch of sun among the ruins. His ghostly sensations, the delirium-like approach to a state of awareness which had no relation to his daily life, were now unlikely and unreal. In an effort to dismiss them altogether, he went over in his mind the whole of the investigative tour he had undertaken, and the events of the years preceding it.

He remembered his youthful luctations against poverty, his desire for that wealth and leisure which alone makes possible the pursuit of every chimera; and his slow but accelerative progress when once he had acquired a modicum of capital and had gone into business for himself as an importer of Oriental rugs. Then he recalled the chance inception of his archaeological enthusiasm — the reading of an illustrated article which described the ancient remains on Easter Island. The insoluble strangeness of these little-known relics had thrilled him profoundly, though he knew not why; and, he

had resolved to visit them some day. The theory of a lost continent in the Pacific appealed to him with an almost intimate lure and imaginative charm; it became his own particular chimera, though he could not have traced to their psychal origin the feelings behind his interest. He read everything procurable on the subject; and as soon as his leisure permitted, he made a trip to Easter Island. A year later, he was able to leave his business indefinitely in the hands of an efficient manager. He hired Thorway, a professional archaeologist with much experience in Italy and Asia Minor, to accompany him; and purchasing an old schooner, manned by a Swedish crew and captain, he had set out on his long, devious voyage among the islands.

Going over all this in his thoughts, Morley decided that it was now time to return home. He had learned all that was verifiable regarding the mysterious ruins. The study had fascinated him as nothing else in his life had ever done; but for some reason his health was beginning to suffer. Perhaps he had thrown himself too assiduously into his labors; the ruins had absorbed him too deeply. He must get away from them, must not risk a renewal of the queer, delusory sensations he had experienced. He recalled the superstitions of the natives, and wondered if there were something in them after all; if unwholesome influences were attached to those primeval stones. Did ghosts return or linger from a world that had been buried beneath the waves for unknown ages? Damn it, he had almost felt at times as if he were some sort of revenant himself.

He called to Thorway, who was standing beside the rail in conversation with one of the Norse sailors.

“I think we have done enough for one voyage, Thorway,” he said. “We will lift anchor in the morning and return to San Francisco.”

Thorway made little effort to conceal his relief. He did not consider the Polynesian isles a very fruitful field for research: the ruins were too old and fragmentary, the period to which they belonged was too conjectural, and did not deeply engage his interest.

“I agree,” he rejoined. “Also, if you will pardon me for saying it, I don’t think the South Sea climate is one of ideal salubriousness. I’ve noticed occasionally indispositions on your part for some time past.”

Morley nodded in a weary acquiescence. It would have been impossible to tell Thorway his actual thoughts and emotions. The man was abysmally unimaginative.

He only hoped that Thorway did not think him a little mad — though, after all, it was quite immaterial.

The day wore on; and the swift, purpureal darkness of eventide was curtailed by the rising of a full moon which inundated sea and land with warm, ethereal quicksilver. At dinner, Morley was lost in a taciturn abstraction; and Thorway was discreetly voluble, but made no reference to the late archaeological find. Svensen, the captain, who ate with them, maintained a monosyllabic reticence, even when he was told of the proposed return to San Francisco. After eating, Morley excused himself and went back to the cane couch. Somewhat to his relief, he was not joined by Thorway.

Moonlight had always aroused in Morley a vague but profound emotion. Even as the ruins had done, it stirred among the shadows of his mind a million ghostly intimations; and the thrill he felt was at times not unalloyed with a cryptic awe and trepidation, akin, perhaps, to the primal fear of darkness itself.

Now, as he gazed at the tropic plenilune, he conceived the sudden and obsessing idea that the orb was somehow larger, and its light more brilliant

than usual; even as they might have been in ages when the moon and earth were much younger. Then he was possessed by a troublous doubt, by an inenarrable sense of dislocation, and a dream-like vagueness which attached itself to the world about him. A wave of terror surged upon him, and he felt that he was slipping irretrievably away from all familiar things. Then the terror ebbed; far that which he had lost was far off and incredible; and a world of circumstances long-forgot was assuming or resuming, the tinge of familiarity.

What, he wondered, was he doing on this queer ship? It was the night of the sacrifice to Rhalu, the selenic goddess; and he, Matla, was to play an essential part in the ceremony. He must reach the temple ere the moon had mounted to her zenith above the star-stone. And it now lacked only an hour of the appointed time.

He rose and peered about with questioning eyes. The deck was deserted, for it was unnecessary to keep watch in that tranquil harbor. Svensen and the mate were doubtless drinking themselves to sleep as usual; the sailors were playing their eternal whist and pedro; and Thorway was in his cabin, probably writing a no-lesseternal monograph on Etruscan tombs. It was only in the most remote and exiguous manner that Morley recollected their existence.

Somehow, he managed to recall that there was a boat which he and Thorway had used in their visits to the isle; and that this boat was moored to the schooner's side. With a tread as lithe and supple as that of a native, he was over the rail and was rowing silently shoreward. A, hundred yards, or little more, and then he stood on the moon-washed sand.

Now he was climbing the palm-clustered hill above the shore, and was heading toward the temple. The air was suffused with a primal, brooding warmth, with the scent, of colossal flowers and ferns not known to modern

botanists. He could see them towering beside his way with their thick, archaic fronds and petals, though such things have not lifted to the moon for aeons. And mounting the crest of the hill, which had dominated the little isle and had looked down to the sea on two sides, he saw in the mellow light the far, unbounded reaches of a softly rolling plain, and sealess horizons everywhere, that glowed with the golden fires of cities. And he knew the names of these cities, and recalled the opulent life of Mu, whose prosperity had of late years been menaced by Atlantean earthquakes and volcanic upheavals. These, it was believed, were owing to the wrath of Rhalu, the goddess who controlled the planetary forces; and human blood was being poured in all her fanes to placate the mysterious deity.

Morley (or Matla) could have remembered a million things; he could have called to mind the simple but strange events of his entire pre-existence in Mu, and the lore and history of the far-flung continent. But there was little room in his consciousness for anything but the destined drama of the night. Long ago (how long he was not sure) he had been chosen among his people for an awful honor; but his heart had failed him ere the time ordained, and he had fled. Tonight, however, he would not flee. A solemn religious rapture, not untinged with fear, guided his steps toward the temple of the goddess.

As he went on, he noticed his raiment, and was puzzled. Why was he wearing these ugly and unseemly garments? He began to remove them and to cast them aside one by one. Nakedness was ordained by sacerdotal law for the role he was to play.

He heard the soft-vowelled murmur of voices about him, and saw the multi-colored robes or gleaming amber flesh of forms that flitted among the archaic plants. The priests and worshippers were also on their way to the temple.

His excitement rose, it became more mystical and more rhapsodic as he neared his destination. His being was flooded by the superstitious awe of ancient man, by the dreadful reverence due to the unknown powers of nature. He peered with a solemn trepidation at the moon as it rose higher in the heavens, and saw in its rounded orb the features of a divinity both benign and malevolent.

Now he beheld the temple, looming whitely above the tops of titan fronds. The walls were no longer ruinous, their fallen blocks were wholly restored. His visit to the place with Thorway was dim as a fever fantasy; but other visits during his life as Matla, and ceremonials of the priests of Rhalu which he had once beheld, were clear and immediate in his memory. He knew the faces he would see, and the ritual wherein he would participate. He thought mostly in pictures; but the words of a strange vocabulary were ready for his recollection; and phrases drifted through his mind with unconscious ease; phrases that would have seemed untelligible gibberish an hour before.

Matla was aware of the concentrated gaze of several hundred eyes as he entered the great, roofless fane. The place was thronged with people, whose round features were of a pre-Aryan type; and many of the faces were familiar to him. But at that moment all of them were parcel of a mystic horror, and were awesome and obscure as the night. Nothing was clear before him, save an opening in the throng, which led to the altar-stone around which the priests of Rhalu were gathered, and wherein Rhalu herself looked down in relentless, icy splendor from an almost vertical elevation.

He went forward with firm steps. The priests, who were clad in lunar purple and yellow, received him in an impassive silence. Counting them, he found that there were only six instead of the usual seven. One there was among them who carried a large, shallow goblet of silver; but the seventh,

whose hand would lift the long and curving knife of some copperish metal, had not yet arrived.

Thorway had found it curiously hard to apply himself to the half-written monograph on Etruscan tombs. An obscure and exasperating restlessness finally impelled him to abandon his wooing of the reluctant muse of archaeology. In a state of steadily mounting irritation, wishing that the bothersome and unprofitable voyage were over, he went on deck.

The moonlight dazzled him with its preternatural brilliance, and he did not perceive for a few moments that the cane couch was empty. When he saw that Morley was gone, he experienced a peculiar mixture of alarm and irritation. He felt sure that Morley had not returned to his cabin. Stepping to the schooner's shoreward side, he noted with little surprise the absence of the moored boat. Morley must have gone ashore for a moonlight visit to the ruined temple; and Thorway frowned heavily at this new presumptive evidence of his employer's eccentricity and aberration. An unwonted responsibility: deep and solemn, stirred him. He seemed to hear an inward injunction, a half-familiar voice, bidding him to take care of Morley. This unhealthy and exorbitant interest in a more than problematic past should be discouraged or at least supervised.

Very quickly, he made up his mind as to what he should do. Going below, he called two of the Swedish sailors from their game of pedro and had them row him ashore in the ship's dinghy. As they neared the beach the boat used by Morley was plainly visible in the plummy shadow of a clump of seaward-leaning palms.

Thorway, without offering any explanation of his purpose in going ashore, told the sailors to return to the ship. Then, following the well-worn trail toward the temple, he mounted the island-slope.

Step by step, as he went on, he became aware of a strange difference in the vegetation. What were these monstrous ferns and primordial-looking flowers about him? Surely it was some weird trick of the moonlight, distorting the familiar palms and shrubs. He had seen nothing of the sort in his daytime visits, and such forms were impossible, anyway. Then, by degrees, he was beset with terrible doubt and bewilderment. There came to him the ineffably horrifying sensation of passing beyond his proper self, beyond all that he knew as legitimate and verifiable. Fantastic, unspeakable thoughts, alien, abnormal impulses, thronged upon him from the sorcerous glare of the effulgent moon. He shuddered at repellent but insistent memories that were not his own, at the ghastly compulsion of an unbelievable command. What on earth was possessing him? Was he going mad like Morley? The moon-bright isle was like some bottomless abyss of nightmare fantasy, into which he sank with nightmare terror.

He sought to recover his hard, materialistic sanity, his belief in the safe literality of things. Then, suddenly and without surprise, he was no longer Thorway.

He knew the real purpose for which he had come ashore — the solemn rite in which he was to play an awful but necessary part. The ordained hour was near — the worshippers, the sacrifice and the six fellow-priests awaited his coming in the immemorial fane of Rhalu.

Unassisted by any of the priests, Matla had stretched himself on the cold altar. How long he lay there, waiting, he could not tell. But at last, by the rustling stir and murmur of the throng, he knew that the seventh priest had arrived.

All fear had left him, as if he were already beyond the pain and suffering of earth. But he knew with a precision well-nigh real as physical sight and

sensation the use which would be made of the copperish knife and the silver goblet.

He lay gazing at the wan heavens, and saw dimly, with far-focused eyes, the leaning face of the seventh priest. The face was doubly familiar... but he had forgotten something. He did not try to remember. Already it seemed to him that the white moon was drawing nearer, was stooping from her celestial station to quaff the awaited sacrifice. Her light blinded him with unearthly fulgor; but he saw dimly the flash of the falling knife ere it entered his heart. There was an instant of tearing pain that plunged on and on through his body, as if its tissues were a deep abyss. Then a sudden darkness took the heavens and blotted out the face of Rhalu; and all things, even pain, were erased for Matla by the black mist of an eternal nothing.

In the morning, Svensen and his sailors waited very patiently for the return of Morley and Thorway from the island. When afternoon came and the two were still absent, Svensen decided that it was time to investigate.

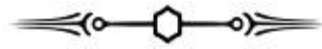
He had received orders to lift anchor for San Francisco that day; but he could not very well depart without Thorway and Morley.

With one of the crew, he rowed ashore and climbed the hill to the ruins. The roofless temple was empty, save for the plants that had taken root in the crevices of its pavement. Svensen and the sailor, looking about for the archaeologists, were horrified from their stolidity by the stains of newly dried blood that lined the great groove in the altar-block to its edge.

They summoned the remainder of the crew. A daylong search of the little island, however, was without result. The natives knew nothing of the whereabouts of Morley and Thorway, and were queerly reticent even in avowing their ignorance. There was no place where the two men could have hidden themselves, granting that they had any reason for a procedure so peculiar. Svensen and his men gave it up. If they had been imaginative, it

might have seemed to them that the archaeologists had vanished bodily into the past.

The Malay Krise



“SAHIB,” SAID THE sword-dealer, “this blade, which came from far Singapore, has not its equal for sharpness in all Delhi.”

He handed me the blade for inspection. It was a long krise, or Malay knife, with a curious boat-shaped hilt, and, as he had said, was very keen.

“I bought it of Sidi Hassen, a Singapore dealer into whose possession it came at the sale of Sultan Sujah Au’s weapons and effects after the Sultan’s capture by the British. Hast heard the tale, Sahib? No? It runs thus:

“Sujah Au was the younger son of a great Sultan. There being little chance of his ever coming to the throne, he left his father’s dominions, and becoming a pirate, set out to carve for himself a name and an empire. Though having at first but a few *prahus* (boats) and less than a hundred men, he made up this lack by his qualities of leadership, which brought him many victories, much plunder and considerable renown. His fame caused many men to join him, and his booty enabled him to build more *prahus*. Adding continually to his fleets, he soon swept the rivers of the Peninsula, and then began to venture upon the sea. In a few years his ships were held in fear and respect by every Dutch merchantman or Chinese junk whose sails loomed above the waters of the China Sea. Inland he began to overrun the dominions of the other Sultans, conquering, amongst others, that of his older brother, who had succeeded to his father’s throne. Sujah Ali’s fame reached far, and its shadow lay upon many peoples.

“Then the English came to the Peninsula and built Singapore. Sujah Ali despatched ships to prey upon their vessels, many of whom he succeeded in

capturing. The English sent big ships after him, bearing many heavy guns and many armed men.

“The Sultan went to meet them in person, with the greater part of his fleet. It was a disastrous day for him. When the red sun sank into the sea, fully fifty of his best *prahus*, and thousands of his men, amongst whom he mourned several of his most noted captains, lay beneath the waters. He fled inland with the shattered remnant of his fleet.

“The British resolved to crush him decisively, sent boats up the rivers, and in numerous hard-fought battles they sunk most of Sujah Ali’s remaining *prahus*, and cleared land and water of the infesting pirates. The Sultan himself, however, they sought in vain. He had fled to a well-nigh inaccessible hiding-place — a small village deep in a network of creeks, swamps, and jungle-covered islands. Here he remained with a few fighting-men while the English hunted unsuccessfully for the narrow, winding entrances.

“Amina, his favorite wife, was among those who had accompanied him to this refuge. She was passionately attached to the Sultan, and, although such was his wish, had positively refused to be left behind.

“There was a beautiful girl in the village, with whom Sujah Ali became infatuated. He finally married her, and she exercised so great an influence over him that Amina, who had hitherto considered herself first in her husband’s estimation, grew jealous. As time passed, and she perceived more clearly how complete was his infatuation, her jealousy grew more intense and violent, and at last prompted her to leave the village secretly one night, and to go to the captain of a British vessel which had been cruising up and down the river for weeks. To this man, one Rankling Sahib, she revealed the secret of Sujah Ali’s hiding place. In thus betraying him, her desire was probably more for revenge upon her rival than upon the Sultan.

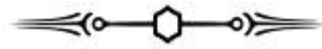
“Rankling Sahib, guided by Amina, passed at midnight through the network of creeks and jungles. He landed his crew and entered the village. The Malays, taken completely by surprise, offered little or no resistance. Many awoke only to find themselves confronted by loaded rifles, and surrendered without opposition.

“Sujah Ali, who had lain awake all evening wondering as to the cause of Amina’s absence, rushed out of his hut with half a score of his men, and made a futile attempt at escape. A desperate fight ensued, in which he used his krise, the same that thou seest, with deadly effect. Two of the English he stretched dead, and a third he wounded severely.

“Rankling Sahib had given orders that the Sultan be taken alive, if possible. Finally, wounded, weary and surrounded by his foes on all sides, the Sultan was made prisoner. And the next morning he was taken down the river to Singapore.

“This is the krise you see on the wall.”

The Ghost of Mohammed Din



“I’LL WAGER A hundred rupees that you won’t stay there over-night,” said Nicholson.

It was late in the afternoon, and we were seated on the veranda of my friend’s bungalow in the Begum suburb at Hyderabad. Our conversation had turned to ghosts, on which subject I was, at the time, rather skeptical, and Nicholson, after relating a number of blood-curdling stories, had finished by remarking that a nearby house, which was said to be haunted, would give me an excellent chance to put the matter to the test.

“Done !” I answered, laughing.

“It’s no joking matter,” said my friend, seriously. “However, if you really wish to encounter the ghost, I can easily secure you the necessary permission. The house, a six-roomed bungalow, owned by one Yussuf Au Borah, is tenanted only by the spirit who appears to regard it as his exclusive property.

“Two years ago it was occupied by a Moslem merchant named Mohammed Din, and his family and servants. One morning they found the merchant dead — stabbed through the heart, and no trace of his murderer, whose identity still remains unrevealed.

“Mohammed Din’s people left, and the place was let to a Parsee up from Bombay on business. He vacated the premises abruptly about midnight, and told a wild tale the next morning of having encountered a number of disembodied spirits, describing the chief one as Mohammed Din.

“Several other people took the place in turn, but their occupancy was generally of short duration. All told tales similar to the Parsee’s. Gradually

it acquired a bad reputation, and the finding of tenants became impossible.”

“Have you ever seen the ghost yourself?” I asked.

“Yes; I spent a night, or rather part of one, there, for I went out of the window about one o’clock. My nerves were not strong enough to stand it any longer. I wouldn’t enter the place again for almost any sum of money.”

Nicholson’s story only confirmed my intention of occupying the haunted house. Armed with a firm disbelief in the supernatural, and a still firmer intention to prove it all rot, I felt myself equal to all the ghosts, native and otherwise, in India. Of my ability to solve the mystery, if there were any, I was quite assured.

“My friend,” said Nicholson to Yussuf Ali Borah an hour later, “wishes to spend a night in your haunted bungalow.”

The person addressed, a fat little Moslem gentleman, looked at me curiously.

“The house is at your service, Sahib,” he said, “I presume that Nicholson Sahib has told you the experiences of the previous tenants?”

I replied that he had. “If the whole thing is not a trumped-up story, there is doubtless some trickery afoot,” said I, “and I warn you that the trickster will not come off unharmed. I have a loaded revolver, and shall not hesitate to use it if I meet any disembodied spirits.”

Yussuf’s only answer was to shrug his shoulders.

He gave us the keys, and we set out for the bungalow, which was only a few minutes’ walk distant. Night had fallen when we reached it. Nicholson unlocked the door and we entered, and lighting a lamp I had brought with me, set out on a tour of inspection. The furniture consisted chiefly of two charpoys, three tabourets, an old divan quite innocent of cushions, a broken punkah, a three-legged chair and a dilapidated rug. Everything was covered with dust; the shutters rattled disconsolately, and all the doors creaked. The

other rooms were meagrely furnished. I could hear rats running about in the dark. There was a compound adjoining, filled with rank reed and a solitary pipal tree. Nicholson said that the ghost generally appeared in one of the rooms opening upon it, and this I selected as the one in which to spend the night. It was a fitting place for ghosts to haunt. The ceiling sagged listlessly, and the one charpoy which it contained had a wobbly look.

“Sleep well,” said Nicholson. “You will find the atmosphere of this spirit-ridden place most conducive to slumber.”

“Rats!” said I.

“Yes, there are plenty of rats here,” he answered as he went out.

Placing the lamp on a tabouret, I lay down, with some misgivings as to its stability, on the charpoy. Happily, these proved unfounded, and laying my revolver close at hand, I took out a newspaper and began to read.

Several hours passed and nothing unusual happened. The ghost failed to materialize, and about eleven, with my fine skepticism greatly strengthened, and feeling a trifle ashamed concerning the hundred rupees which my friend would have to hand over the next morning, I lay down and tried to go to sleep. I had no doubt that my threat about the revolver to Yussuf Ali Borah had checked any plans for scaring me that might have been entertained.

Scarcely were my eyes closed when all the doors and windows, which had been creaking and rattling all evening, took on renewed activity. A light breeze had sprung up, and one shutter, which hung only by a single hinge, began to drum a tune on the wall. The rats scuttled about with redoubled energy, and a particularly industrious fellow gnawed something in the further corner for about an hour. It was manifestly impossible to sleep. I seemed to hear whisperings in the air, and once thought that I detected faint footsteps going and coming through the empty rooms. A vague feeling of

eeriness crept upon me, and it required a very strong mental effort to convince myself that these sounds were entirely due to imagination.

Finally the breeze died down, the loose shutter ceased to bang, the rat stopped gnawing, and comparative quiet being restored, I fell asleep. Two hours later I woke, and taking out my watch, saw, though the lamp had begun to burn dimly, that the hands pointed to two o'clock. I was about to turn over, when again I heard the mysterious footsteps, this time quite audibly. They seemed to approach my room, but when I judged them to be in the next apartment, ceased abruptly. I waited five minutes in a dead silence, with my nerves on edge and my scalp tingling.

Then I became aware that there was something between me and the opposite wall. At first it was a dim shadow, but as I watched, it darkened into a body. A sort of phosphorescent light emanated from it, surrounding it with pale radiance.

The lamp flared up and went out, but the figure was still visible. It was that of a tall native dressed in flowing white robes and a blue turban. He wore a bushy beard and had eyes like burning coals of fire. His gaze was directed intently upon me, and I felt cold shivers running up and down my spine. I wanted to shriek, but my tongue seemed glued to the roof of my mouth. The figure stepped forward and I noticed that the robe was red at the breast as though with blood.

This, then, was the ghost of Mohammed Din. Nicholson's story was true, and for a moment my conviction that the supernatural was all nonsense went completely to pieces. Only momentarily, however, for I remembered that I had a revolver, and the thought gave me courage. Perhaps it was a trick after all, and anger arose in me, and a resolve not to let the trickster escape unscathed.

I raised the weapon with a quick movement and fired. The figure being not over five paces distant, it was impossible to miss, but when the smoke had cleared it had not changed its position.

It began to advance, making no sound, and in a few moments was beside the charpoy. With one remaining vestige of courage I raised my revolver and pulled the trigger three times in succession, but without visible effect. I hurled the weapon at the figure's head, and heard it crash against the opposite wall an instant later. The apparition, though visible, was without tangibility.

Now it began to disappear. Very slowly at first it faded, then more rapidly until I could make out only the bare outlines. Another instant and all was gone but the outline of one hand, which hung motionless in the air. I got up and made a step towards it, then stopped abruptly, for the outlines again began to fill in, the hand to darken and solidify. Now I noticed something I had not before seen — a heavy gold ring set with some green gem, probably an emerald, appeared to be on the middle finger.

The hand began to move slowly past me towards the door opening into the next apartment. Lighting the lamp, I followed, all fear being thrown aside and desiring to find the explanation of the phenomenon. I could hear faint footfalls beneath the hand, as though the owner, though invisible, were still present. I followed it through the adjoining apartment and into the next, where it again stopped and hung motionless. One finger was pointed toward the further corner, where stood a tabouret, or stand.

Impelled, I think, by some force other than my own volition, I went over and lifting the tabouret, found a small wooden box, covered with dust, beneath.

Turning about I saw that the hand had disappeared.

Taking the box with me, I returned to my room. The thing was made of very hard wood and in size was perhaps ten inches in length by eight in width and four in height. It was light, and the contents rustled when I shook it. I guessed them to be letters or papers, but having nothing to pry the box open with, I concluded to wait until morning before trying to.

Strange as it may seem I soon fell asleep. You would naturally think that a man would not feel inclined to slumber immediately after encountering a disembodied spirit. I can give no explanation of it.

The sun was streaming through the window when I awoke, and so cheerful and matter-of-fact was the broad daylight that I wondered if the events of the night were not all a dream. The presence of the box, however, convinced me that they were not.

Nicholson came in and appeared much surprised and a trifle discomfited to find me still in possession.

“Well,” he inquired, “what happened? What did you see?”

I told him what had occurred and produced the box as proof.

An hour afterwards, Nicholson, with a short native sword and considerable profanity, was trying to pry the thing open. He finally succeeded. Within were a number of closely-written sheets of paper and some letters, most of which were addressed to Mohammed Din.

The papers were mostly in the form of memoranda and business accounts such as would be made by a merchant. They were written in execrable Urdu, hopelessly jumbled together, and though all were dated, it was no small task to sort them out. The letters were mostly regarding business affairs, but several, which were written in a very fair hand, were from a cousin of Mohammed Din’s, one Ali Bagh, an Agra horse-trader. These, too, with one exception, were commonplace enough. Nicholson knitted his brows as he read it, and then handed it to me. The greater part,

being of little interest, has escaped my memory, but I recollect that the last paragraph ran thus:

“I do not understand how you came by the knowledge, nor why you wish to use it to ruin me. It is all true. If you have any love for me, forbear.”

“What does that mean ?” asked Nicholson. “What secret did Mohammed Din possess that he could have used to ruin his cousin ?”

We went through the memoranda carefully, and near the bottom found the following, dated April 21, 1881, according to our notation:

“To-day I found the letters which I have long been seeking. They are ample proof of what I have long known, but have hitherto been unable to substantiate, that Ali Bagh is a counterfeiter, the chief of a large band. I have but to turn them over to the police, and he will be dragged away to jail, there to serve a term of many years. It will be good revenge — part compensation, at least, for the injuries he has done me.

“That explains Ali Bagh’s letter,” said Nicholson. “Mohammed Din was boastful enough to write to him, telling him that he knew of his guilt and intended to prove it.”

Next were several sheets in a different hand and signed “Mallek Khan.” Mallek Khan, it seemed, was a friend of Ali Bagh’s, and the sheets were in the form of a letter. But being without fold, it was quite evident they had not been posted.

The communication related to certain counterfeiting schemes, and the names of a number of men implicated appeared. This, plainly, was the proof alluded to by Mohammed Din, and which he had threatened his cousin to turn over to the police.

There was nothing else of interest save the following in Mohammed Din’s hand, dated April 17th, 1881:

“To-morrow I shall give the papers to the authorities. I have delayed too long, and was very foolish to write to Ali Bagh.

“I passed a man in the street today who bore a resemblance to my cousin... I could not be sure... But if he is here, then may Allah help me, for he will hesitate at nothing...”

What followed was illegible.

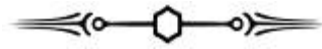
“On the night of April 21st,” said Nicholson, “Mohammed Din was killed by a person or persons unknown.” He paused and then went on: “This Ali Bagh is a man with whom I have had some dealings in horses, and an especially vicious crook it was that he got three hundred rupees out of me for. He has a bad reputation as a horse-dealer, and the Agra police have long been patiently seeking evidence of his implication in several bold counterfeiting schemes. Mallek Khan, one of his accomplices, was arrested, tried and sentenced to fifteen years’ imprisonment, but refused to turn State’s evidence on Ali Bagh. The police are convinced that Ali Bagh was as much, if not more implicated, than Mallek Khan, but they can do nothing for lack of proof. The turning over of these papers, however, as poor Mohammed Din would have done had he lived, will lead to his arrest and conviction.

“It was Ali Bagh who killed Mohammed Din, I am morally convinced, his motive, of course, being to prevent the disclosure of his guilt. Your extraordinary experience last night and the murdered man’s papers point to it. Yet we can prove nothing, and your tale would be laughed at in court.”

Some blank sheets remained in the bottom of the box, and my friend tilted them out as he spoke. They fluttered to the veranda and something rolled out from amongst them and lay glittering in the sunshine. It was a heavy gold ring set with an emerald — the very same that I had seen upon the apparition’s finger several hours before.

A week or so later, as the result of the papers that Nicholson sent to the Agra police, accompanied by an explanatory note, one Ali Bagh, horse-trader, found himself on trial, charged with counterfeiting. It was a very short trial, his character and reputation going badly against him, and it being proven that he was the leader of the gang of which Mallek Khan was thought to be a member, he was sentenced to a somewhat longer term in jail than his accomplice.

The Mahout



ARTHUR MERTON, BRITISH resident at Jizapur, and his cousin, John Hawley, an Agra newspaper editor, who had run down into Central India for a few weeks' shooting at Merton's invitation, reined in their horses just outside the gates of Jizapur. The Maharajah's elephants, a score of the largest and finest "tuskers" in Central India, were being ridden out for their daily exercise. The procession was led by Rajah, the great elephant of State, who towered above the rest like a warship amongst merchantmen. He was a magnificent elephant, over twelve feet from his shoulders to the ground, and of a slightly lighter hue than the others, who were of the usual muddy gray. On the ends of his tusks gleamed golden knobs.

"What a kingly animal !" exclaimed Hawley, as Rajah passed.

As he spoke, the mahout, or driver, who had been sitting his charge like a bronze image, turned and met Hawley's eyes. He was a man to attract attention, this mahout, as distinctive a figure among his brother mahouts as was Rajah among the elephants. He was apparently very tall, and of a high-caste type, the eyes proud and fearless, the heavy beard carefully trimmed, and the face cast in a handsome, dignified mold.

Hawley gave a second exclamation as he met the mahout's gaze and stared at the man hard. The Hindu, after an impressive glance, turned his head, and the elephant went on.

"I could swear that I have seen that man before," said Hawley, at his cousin's interrogatory expression. "It was near Agra, about six years ago, when I was out riding one afternoon. My horse, a nervous, high-strung Waler, bolted at the sight of an umbrella which someone had left by the

roadside. It was impossible to stop him, indeed, I had all I could to keep on. Suddenly, the Hindu we have just passed, or his double, stepped out into the road and grabbed the bridle. He was carried quite a distance, but managed to keep his grip, and the Waler finally condescended to stop. After receiving my thanks with a dignified depredation of the service he had done me, the Hindu disappeared, and I have not seen him since.”

“It is scarcely probable, though, that this mahout is the same,” Hawley resumed, after a pause. “My rescuer was dressed as a high-caste, and it is not conceivable that such a one would turn elephant driver.”

“I know nothing of the man,” said Merton, as they rode on into the city. “He has been Rajah’s mahout ever since I came here a year ago. Of course, as you say, he cannot be the man who stopped your horse. It is merely a chance resemblance.”

The next afternoon, Hawley was out riding alone. He had left the main toad for a smaller one running into the jungle, intending to visit a ruined temple of which Merton had told him. Suddenly he noticed elephant tracks in the dust, exceedingly large ones, which he concluded could have been made only by Rajah. A momentary curiosity as to why the elephant had been ridden off into the jungle, and also concerning the mahout, led Hawley to follow the tracks when the road branched and they took the path opposite to the one that he had intended to follow. In a few minutes he came to a spot of open ground in the thick luxuriant jungle, and reined in quickly at what he saw there.

Rajah stood in the clearing, holding something in his trunk which Hawley at first glance took to be a man, dressed in a blue and gold native attire, and with a red turban. Another look told him that it was merely a dummy — some old clothes stuffed with straw. As he watched, the mahout gave a low command, reinforced with a jab behind the ear from his ankus,

or goad. Rajah gave an upward swing with his trunk, and released his hold on the figure, which flew skyward for at least twenty feet, and then dropped limply to earth. The mahout watched its fall with an expression of what seemed to be malevolence upon his face, though Hawley might have been mistaken as to this at the distance. He gave another command, and a jab at the elephant's cheek — a peculiar, quick thrust, at which Rajah picked the dummy up and placed it on his back behind the mahout in the place usually occupied by the howdah. The Hindu directing, the figure was again seized and hurled into the air.

Much mystified, Hawley watched several repetitions of this strange performance, but was unable to puzzle out what it meant. Finally, the mahout caught sight of him, and rode the elephant hastily away into the jungle on the opposite side of the clearing. Evidently he did not wish to be observed or questioned. Hawley continued his journey to the temple, thinking over the curious incident as he went. He did not see the mahout again that day.

He spoke of what he had seen to Merton that evening, but his cousin paid little attention to the tale, saying that no one could comprehend anything done by natives, and that it wasn't worth while to wonder at their actions anyway. Even if one could find the explanation, it wouldn't be worth knowing.

The scene in the jungle recurred to Hawley many times, probably because of the resemblance of the mahout to the man who had stopped his horse at Agra. But he could think of no plausible explanation of what he had seen. At last he dismissed the matter from his mind altogether.

At the time of Hawley's visit, great preparations were being made for the marriage of the Maharajah of Jizapur, Krishna Singh, to the daughter of the neighboring sovereign. There was to be much feasting, firing of guns, and a

gorgeous procession. All the Rajabs, Ranas, and Thakurs, etc., for a radius of at least hundred miles, were to be present. The spectacle, indeed, was one of the inducements that had drawn Hawley down into Central India.

After two weeks of unprecedented activity and excitement in the city of Jizapur, the great day came, with incessant thunder of guns from the Maharajah's palace during all the forenoon, as the royalty of Central Indian arrived with its hordes of picturesque, tattered, dirty retainers and soldiery. Each king or dignitary was punctiliously saluted according to his rank, which in India is determined by the number of guns that may be fired in his honor.

At noon a great procession, the Maharajah heading it, issued from the palace to ride out and meet the bride and her father and attendants, who were to reach Jizapur at that hour.

Hawley and Merton watched the pageant from the large and many-colored crowd that lined the roadside without the city gates. As Rajah, the great State elephant emerged, with Krishna Singh in the gold-embroidered howdah, or canopied seat, on his back, a rising cloud of dust in the distance proclaimed the coming of the bride and her relatives.

Behind the Maharajah came a number of elephants, bearing the nobles and dignitaries of Jizapur, and the neighboring princes. Then emerged richly caparisoned horses, with prismatically-attired riders — soldiers and attendants. Over this great glare of color and movement was the almost intolerable light of the midday Eastern sun.

The two Englishmen were some distance from the city gates, so that when the Maharajah's slow, majestic procession passed them, that of the bride was drawing near — a similar one, and less gorgeous only because it was smaller.

Perhaps fifty yards separated the two when something happened to bring both processions to a halt. Hawley, who happened at the moment to be idly watching the elephant Rajah, and his driver, saw the mahout reach swiftly forward and stab the animal's cheek with his goad, precisely as he had done on that day in the jungle when Hawley had come unexpectedly upon him. Probably no one else noticed the action, or, if they did, attached any importance to it in the excitement that followed.

As he reached with his trunk for the dummy seated on his back, so Rajah reached into the howdah and grasped Krishna Singh about the waist. In an instant the astonished, terror-stricken Maharajah was dangling in mid-air where the elephant held him poised a moment. Then, in spite of the shouts, commands, and blows of his mahout, Rajah began to swing Krishna Singh to and fro, slowly at first, but with a gradually increasing speed. It was like watching a gigantic pendulum. The fascinated crowd gazed in a sudden and tense silence for what seemed to them hours, though they were really only seconds, before the elephant, with a last vicious upward impetus of his helpless victim, released his hold. Krishna Singh soared skyward, a blot of gold and red against the intense, stark, blazing azure of the Indian sky. To the horror-stricken onlookers he seemed to hang there for hours, before he began to fall back from the height to which the giant elephant had tossed him as one would toss a tennis-ball. Hawley turned away, unable to look any longer, and in an instant heard the hollow, lifeless thud as the body struck the ground.

The sound broke the spell of horror and amazement that had held the crowd, and a confused babble arose, interspersed with a few wails and cries. One sharp shriek came from the curtained howdah of the bride. The Maharajali's body guard at once galloped forward and formed a ring about

the body. The crowd, to whom the elephant had gone “musth,” or mad, began to retreat and disperse.

Hawley, in a few words, told his cousin of what he has seen the mahout do, and his belief that the elephant’s action had thus been incited.

The two Englishmen went to the captain of the body-guard, who was standing by the side of the fallen Maharajah. Krishna Singh lay quite dead, his neck broken by the fall. The captain, upon being informed of what Hawley had seen, directed some of his men to go in search of the mahout, who, in the confusion, had slipped from Rajah’s neck, disappearing no one knew where. Their search was unsuccessful, nor did a further one, continued for over a week, reveal any trace of the elephant driver.

But several days afterward Hawley received a letter, bearing the Agra postmark. It was in a hand unfamiliar to him and was written in rather stiff, though perfectly correct English, such as an educated native would write. It was as follows: To Hawley Sahib:

I am the man who stopped the Sahib’s horse near Agra one day, six years ago. Because I have seen in the Sahib’s eyes that he recognized and remembers me, I am writing this. He will then understand much that has puzzled him.

My father was Krishna Singh’s half-brother. Men who bore my father an enmity, invented evidence of a plot on his part to murder Krishna Singh and seize the throne. The Maharajah, bearing him little love and being of an intensely suspicious nature, required little proof to believe this, and caused my father and several others of the family to be seized and thrown into the palace dungeons. A few days later, without trial, they were led out and executed by the “Death of the Elephant.” Perchance the Sahib has not heard of this. The manner of it is thus: The condemned man is made to kneel with his head on a block of stone, and an elephant, at a command from the

driver, places one of his feet on the prisoner's head, killing him, of course, instantly.

I, who was but a youth at the time, by some inadvertence was allowed to escape, and made my way to Agra, where I remained several years with distant relatives, learning, in that time, to speak and write English I was intending to enter the service of the British Raj, when an idea of revenge on Krishna Singh, for my father's death, suddenly sprang into full conception. I had long plotted, forming many impracticable and futile plans for vengeance, but the one that then occurred to me seemed possible, though extremely difficult. As the Sahib has seen, it proved successful.

I at once left Agra, disguising myself as a low-caste, and went to Burma, where I learned elephant-driving — a work not easy for one who has not been trained to it from boyhood. In doing this, I sacrificed my caste. In my thirst for revenge, however, it seemed but a little thing.

After four years in the jungle I came to Jizapur and, being a skilled and fully accredited mahout, was given a position in the Maharajah's stables. Krishna Singh never suspected my identity, for I had changed greatly in the ten years since I had fled from Jizapur, and who would have thought to find Kshatriya in the position of such a low-caste elephant-driver?

Gradually, for my skill and trustworthiness, I was advanced in position, and at last was entrusted with the State elephant, Rajab. This was what I had long been aiming at, for on my attaining the care of Krishna Singh's own elephant depended the success or failure of my plan.

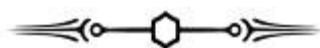
This position obtained, my purpose was but half-achieved. It was necessary that the elephant be trained for his part, and this, indeed, was perhaps the most difficult and dangerous part of my work. It was not easy to avoid observation, and detection was likely to prove fatal to me and to my plan. On that day when the Sahib came upon me in the jungle, I thought

my scheme doomed, and prepared to flee. But evidently no idea of the meaning of the performance in the jungle entered the Sahib's mind.

At last came my day of revenge, and after the Maharajah's death I succeeded in miraculously escaping, though I had fully expected to pay for my vengeance with my own life. I am safe now — not all the police and secret emissaries in India can find me.

The death that my father met has been visited upon his murderer, and the shadow of those dreadful days and of that unavenged crime has at last been lifted from my heart. I go forth content, to face life and fate calmly, and with a mind free and untroubled.

The Raja and the Tiger



THERE WAS MORE than one reason why Bently did not view his appointment as British Resident at Shaitanabad with enthusiasm. The climate was reported to be particularly hot even for India, the population largely composed of snakes, tigers, and wild boars, and the attitude of the natives from the Rajab down unfriendly. The last Resident had died of sunstroke, so it was said, and the one before him departed suddenly for an unknown destination without taking the trouble to apply for leave of absence. But as somebody had to occupy the position, Bently went to Shaitanabad; from the nearest railway station one hundred miles by camel and bullock cart over parched hills and sandy desert.

His early impressions of the place were hardly reassuring. His first glimpse of it was from the summit of a cactus-covered hill through a red haze of dust-laden heat. The principal feature which caught his eye was the Raja's fortress-palace perched on a high rock on the northeast side and grimly overlooking the flat-roofed city. It was known as the Nahargarh, or Tiger Fort. For the rest Shaitanabad may be summed up as a place of narrow, irregular alleys, bazaars with shops little larger than dry-goods boxes, bad smells, a perpetual plague of insects, gaily clothed people, and a general Arabian Nights atmosphere. A thousand years ago it was the same, and so it will be a thousand years hence. The local temperature was a 120° in the shade, sometimes more. Except the Resident, there were no other Englishmen in the place, not even a missionary. That is sufficient testimony as to Shaitanabad's character.

Bently regarded it as fortunate that the Residency was situated outside the city, and that his predecessor's staff of Bengali and Rajput servants were waiting to receive him. A bath, a fairly well-cooked meal, and a good night's rest, in spite of the heat, removed the exhaustion of the journey and made the outlook appear more satisfactory.

His first duty being to call on the Raja, he early proceeded to the palace accompanied by his servant, Lal Das. Ascending a flight of steps cut in the towering sandstone rock, which was the only means of access to the fort, Bently passed through a great gate into a courtyard. There he was left to stand in the full rays of the Indian sun while the Raja's attendants went in to announce the Resident's arrival. Finally they returned and conducted him through a deep veranda into a hall, from which another room opened. This room, carpeted with Persian rugs and hung with rare kinkhab draperies, seemed cool and pleasant after the heat without.

The Raja, Chumbu Singh, was seated on a cushioned *gadi*, surrounded by several attendants. He was a tall, slender man of about forty, and wore the peculiar Rajput side whiskers. His attire consisted of a pearl-embroidered coat, trousers of white tussah silk, and an elaborately embroidered turban. One hand toyed with the gem-encrusted hilt of a short sword stuck in a broad silk cummerbund.

At this first meeting conversation was short and formal. The Raja asked after Bently's health, and requested his opinion of such matters as the climate. He spoke fluent English, and seemed well educated and intelligent.

"I hope you will like Shaitanabad," he said, finally. "Sport here is good. If at any time you care to hunt tigers, I shall be glad to place all the facilities in my power at your disposal."

Bently retired on the whole rather favorably impressed with the Raja and inclined to treat certain adverse reports of his conduct as exaggerated.

Native princes are always more or less prone to irritation at the ways of British Residents. Probably such was the basis of Chumbu Singh's offense in British official quarters.

During the next two or three weeks Bently thought he had reason to be pleased at his judgment of native character. Chumbu Singh fell so readily into certain administrative reforms proposed by Bently that there appeared little doubt of his earnestness to walk in the path of modern progress. So far things looked much better than he had been led to anticipate, even the temperature dropping to 98° at midnight. It was after the settlement of a land ownership case, in which Bently's assistance had been requested, that the Raja made a proposal.

'I have arranged for a tiger hunt tonight,' he said. 'Would you like to go?'

Bently eagerly responded in the affirmative.

'This is a terrible animal, Sahib,' continued the Raja. 'He has killed many people. His den is in the hills — an old cave temple, haunted, my people, say, by ghosts and devils. However that may be, the tiger is many devils in himself. He stalks both cattle and villagers in broad day light, and kills not only when hungry, but out of the devilishness of his heart. We have planned to get him at the cave.'

When the last rays of the sun had faded from the hot red sandstone of the Nahargarh, and the gray veil of dusk had fallen over Shaitanabad, Chumbu Singh and several followers came to the Residency to announce that all was ready. They were armed and mounted on wiry Baluchi ponies. Bently joined them, accompanied by Lal Das, and the party set off across the rapidly darkening plain. Their destination, as indicated by Chumbu Singh, was a mass of low-lying, jungle-clad hills two miles to the northeast. The plain, or rather desert, between was barren with scarce a tree or shrub, and its

monotony was broken only by a series of nasty mullahs or gulleys, which gave much trouble, necessitating careful horsemanship and slow traveling.

Reaching the hills without mishaps, the horses were left near an old tomb in charge of the servants. The Raja, Bently, Lal Das, and two Rajputs continued afoot. They first followed a bullock trail, and then a narrow foot-path, one of the Raj puts acting as guide. The path, winding up and down, through cactus jungle, deep ravines, and among great boulders, led well into the hills.

The moon had risen, and as they emerged from a patch of jungle, Bently saw the cave temple of which Chumbu Singh had spoken. It was in a steep hillside, where the formation changed from sandstone to light granite. In front was a level space overgrown with cactus, jungle plants, and a few larger trees. There were three entrances, the central one being about fifteen feet high, and the other two smaller. The larger one was open, but the others were choked with debris.

The hunters toiled up the hillside, scrambling over boulders and through the thick scrub. There was no path, and it was not pleasant travelling. A handful of cactus spines, even on a moonlit night in the presence of ancient and interesting ruins, is more productive of profanity than enthusiasm.

“This is the ancient temple of Jains,” said the Raja when they at last came panting to the entrance.

Bently peered within to behold the moonlight shining on huge indistinct figures, old forgotten gods carved in the solid granite. There were also great footprints in the thick dust, evidently those of the tiger. Undoubtedly he was a monster animal, for Bently had never seen pads to equal them.

The two Rajputs examined the pads carefully, and gave it as their opinion that the tiger had crept forth, bent on stalking about nightfall, and would probably not return until morning. They were sure he was not in the

cave. The Raj a seemed annoyed at the prospect of a long wait, and abused the Raj puts for not arranging matters so that they might have arrived at the cave earlier and so intercepted the tiger.

“I owe you many apologies,” he said, turning Bently. “You see what comes of trusting to these fellows. But since it is such an effort to get here, I suggest that we wait for the tiger.”

“Certainly,” agreed Bently. “I am willing to wait as long as you like for a shot at that beast.”

“Very well,” the Raja nodded. “In the meantime suppose we take a look at the cave temple. It is an interesting place, of its kind without equal in India.”

To this Bently readily assented. Thereupon the Raj a sent off one of the Raj puts and Lal Das with an order for the rest of the retainers to keep watch in case the tiger returned unexpectedly. The other Rajput then produced a torch, and the party of three entered the cave. First they passed through a sort of peristyle, or antechamber, which, thirty yards from the entrance, opened into a vast grotto. This was the main excavation. Huge stone pillars, elaborately sculptured, supported the roof, and around the sides great gods and goddesses of the Jain mythology, called Arhats, glared downward. The torch illuminated dimly, leaving much in shadow, and in the shadow imagination created strange fantasies. A narrow passage from the grotto ended in a smaller chamber littered with fallen fragments. It was more than once necessary to climb over some god whose face was in the dust. Another short passage led to an arched entrance two-thirds blocked with debris.

“We cannot go any further,” said the Raja, “but if you take the torch and climb up on that pile, you will be able to see into a greater cave beyond. My

superstitious retainers believe that it is the abode of ghosts and devils, the guardians of the temple.”

Bently’s curiosity was stimulated. Torch in hand he surmounted the obstruction, and peered into a gulf of black darkness. He seemed on the verge of a great precipice, the limits and bottom of which the torchlight failed to reach. From far beneath he fancied he caught a splash of water tumbling over a rocky bed, and strange echoes floated upward, but he could see nothing. It was an appalling abyss, which, for all he knew, might sink into the foundations of the earth.

Suddenly he received a violent push from behind, accompanied by a muttered curse hurled from the Raja’s lips. Bently tumbled forward, and, in doing so, threw out an arm wildly to save himself. It caught the barrel of the Raja’s rifle, swept it from his grasp, and hurled it clattering into the chasm beneath. Bently promptly followed the Raja’s rifle down a steep crumbling slope to what would have been certain death had his own rifle not brought him up with a jerk by becoming lodged to half its length between two rocks. As it were, there he hung in midair with the buttress of his rifle for his only support. A shower of following pebbles swept on down into nothingness.

For some moments he remained almost stunned by the peril of the situation, but presently his mind began to gather in the slender chances of escape. He had apparently been brought up with his back against a side-wall of rock and with one foot resting on a narrow projection. Reaching out a hand, and groping with it, he discovered that the narrow projection was one of a flight of irregular steps cut in the rock and leading upward. If a hazardous foothold, he presumed it had been used at some period, and decided to tempt it course.

He balanced himself carefully, and disengaging his rifle, crept slowly upward step by step. Once his foot slipped, and he almost fell, but throwing

himself inward he found he had stumbled into the entrance of a narrow passage. That meant safety from the chasm at any rate, and he gave vent to a huge breath of relief. His next act was to test the springs of his rifle, and so far as he was able to judge in the darkness he was further gratified to find that it was uninjured. Then he went cautiously forward, guiding his progress by a hand on the side-wall. Presently he came to a broad flight of steps partly choked up with fallen debris. Climbing up this, he emerged into the grotto of the temple.

Then he drew back suddenly. A coughing snarl echoed through the cavern. Bently softly moved behind the stone image of a god, and looked out from its shadow. From a cleft in the roof of the temple a stream of moonlight fell within, and toned with silver the yellow body and velvet stripes of a monster tiger. It also shone upon the prostrate forms of the Raja and his Rajput retainer, held beneath the huge paws of the Lord of the Jungle. Again the coughing snarl echoed through the temple. The eyes of the beast flashed with savage thirst for blood as it lowered its head to plunge its fangs into the throat of one of its victims.

Bently raised his rifle to the shoulder, took steady aim, and fired. A terrific roar shook the stone gods, a gigantic convulsion seized upon the body of the tiger as it rolled over. Bently fired again, and then strode from his place of concealment. Another shot at closer range finished the death struggle of the tiger. Its last breath went forth in a choking growl of defiance.

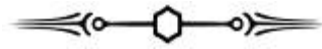
It took but a cursory examination to convince Bently that both the Raja and the Rajput were past rendering any account of their treachery on this earth, and a lack of response to his shouts made it plain that the Raja's retainers had promptly bolted when the tiger unexpectedly returned. The

Raja and the Rajput has thus been left to encounter the powerful beast unarmed.

How Bently regained the Residency was a matter he was unable to explain except by instinct, but daylight had already broken when he reached the compound. Then he acted with swift decision.

He sent orders for the Raja's retainers to appear at the Residency for an investigation, which eventually led to a thorough exploration of the temple. By another entrance the bottom of the abyss was gained, and sundry relics discovered there proved how the Raja had relieved himself of the undesirable presence of those who had interfered with his dubious proceedings.

Something New



“TELL ME SOMETHING new,” she moaned, twisting in his arms on the sofa. “Say or do something original — and I’ll love you. Anything but the wheezy gags, the doddering compliments, the kisses that were stale before Antony passed them off on Cleopatra”

“Alas,” he said, “there is nothing new in the world except the rose and gold and ivory of your perfect loveliness. And there is nothing original except my love for you.”

“Old stuff,” she sneered, moving away from him. “They all say that.”

“They ?” he queried, jealously.

“The ones before you, of course,” she replied, in a tone of languid reminiscence. “It only took four lovers to convince me of the quotidian sameness of man. After that, I always knew what to expect. It was maddening: they came to remind me of so many cuckoo docks, with the eternal monotony of their advances, the punctuality of their compliments. I soon knew the whole repertory. As for kissing — each one began with my hands, and ended with my lips. There was one genius, though, who kissed me on the throat the first time. I might have taken him, if he had lived up to the promise of such a beginning.”

“What shall I say?” he queried, in despair. “Shall I tell you that your eyes are the unwaning moons above the cypress-guarded lakes of dreamland? Shall I say that your hair is colored like the sunsets of Cogaigue ?”

She kicked off one of her slippers, with a little jerk of disgust.

“You aren’t the first poet that I’ve had for a lover. One of them used to read me that sort of stuff by the hour. All about moons, and stars and

sunsets, and rose-leaves and lotus-petals.”

“Ah,” he cried hopefully, gazing at the slipperless foot. “Shall I stand on my head and kiss your tooty-wootsies ?”

She smiled briefly. “That wouldn’t be so bad. But you’re not an acrobat, my dear. You’d fall over and break something — provided you didn’t fall on me.”

“Well, I give it up,” he muttered, in a tone of hopeless resignation “I’ve done my darndest to please you for the past four months; and I’ve been perfectly faithful and devoted, too; I haven’t so much as looked corner-wise at another woman — not even that blue-eyed brunette who tried to vamp me at the Artists’ Ball the other night.”

She sighed impatiently. “What does that matter? I am sure you needn’t be faithful unless you want to be. As for pleasing me — well you did give a thrill once upon a time, during the first week of our acquaintance. Do you remember? We were lying out under the pines on the old rug that we had taken with us; and you suddenly turned to me and asked me if I would like to be a hamadryad... Ah! there is a hamadryad in every women; but it takes a faun to call it forth... My dear, if you had only been a faun !”

“A real faun would have dragged you off by the hair,” he growled, “So you wanted some of that caveman stuff, did you? I suppose that’s what you mean by ‘something new.’”

“Anything, anything, providing it is new,” she drawled, with ineffable languor. Looking like a poem to Ennui by Baudelaire, she leaned back and lit another cigarette in her holder of carved ivory.

He look at her, and wondered if any one female had ever before hidden so much perversity, capriciousness, and incomprehensibility behind a rosebud skin and harvest-coloured hair. A sense of acute exasperation mounted in him — something that had smouldered for months, half-restrained by his

natural instincts of chivalry and gentleness. He remembered an aphorism from Nietzsche: “When thou goest to women, take thy whip.” “By Jove, the old boy had the right dope,” he thought. “Too bad I didn’t think to take my whip with me; but after all, I have my hands, and a little rough stuff can’t make matters any worse.”

Aloud, he said: “It’s a pity no one ever thought to give you a good paddling. All women are spoiled and perverse, more or less, but you—” He broke off, and drew her across his knees like a naughty child, with a movement so muscular and sudden that she had neither the time nor the impulse to resist or cry out.

“I’m going to give you the spanking of your life,” he growled, as his right hand rose and descended... The cigarette holder fell from her lips to the Turkish carpet, and began to burn a hole in the flowered pattern... A dozen smart blows, with a sound like the clapping of shingles, and then he released her, and rose to his feet. His anger had vanished, and his only feeling was an overpowering sense of shame and consternation. He could merely wonder how and why he had done it.

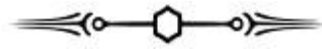
“I suppose you will never forgive me,” he began.

“Oh, you are wonderful,” she breathed. “I didn’t think you had it in you. My faun! My cave-man! Do it again.”

Doubly dumbfounded as he was, he had enough presence of mind to adjust himself to the situation. “Women are certainly the limit,” he thought, dazedly. “But one must make the best of them, and miss no chances.”

Preserving a grim and mysterious silence, he picked her up in his arms.

The Justice of the Elephant



NIKHAL *SINGH*, RAJAH of Anapur, was acquiring the obese complacency of middle age; and his memories were blurred and befogged by a liberal use of Raiput opium. It was seldom that he recalled Ameera; though, as a general rule, an unfaithful woman is not the easiest thing in the world to forget. But Nikhal Singh had possessed so many wives and concubines; and one more or less was of no great importance, even though she had been eyed like the sloe and footed like the gazelle and had preferred an elephant-driver to a Rajah. And as Nikhal Singh grew older, and became wearier of women and fonder of opium, such matters were even less memorable or worthy of consideration.

However, the incident had angered him greatly at the time; and the doom he devised for Ameera was the most atrocious one conceivable. Her story was long remembered and whispered in the royal zenana; though whether or not the example had served to deter others from similar derelictions is a moot problem.

Ameera was a dancing-girl, and therefore of low birth; and her rise in the Rajah's favor had not been regarded with unqualified approval by his legitimate wives. Under the circumstances, it was highly unwise for Ameera to carry on a love affair with the comely young elephant-driver, Rama Das; for there were many jealous eyes to note the amour, and jealous tongues to bear tattle thereof to Nikhal Singh. Ameera had been watched; and a man was seen leaving her apartments in the early morning hours. The man was not positively identified as Rama Das; but the presence of anyone save the Rajah in those sacrosanct purlieus was enough to damn the unfortunate girl.

The punishment inflicted by Nikhal Singh was no less swift than dreadful. The girl was condemned to a death usually reserved for the lowest criminals; and her suspected lover, Rama Das, by a refinement of Rajput cruelty, was chosen to her executioner. She was made to kneel and place her head on a block of stone in the palace courtyard; and thereupon the great elephant ridden by Rama Das, at a signal from the driver, lifted one of his enormous hoofs and brought it down on the head of the dancing-girl, crushing her to an instant pulp. During the awful ordeal, no sign of recognition or emotion was betrayed either by Rama Das or Ameera; and the gloating Rajah was perhaps disappointed in this respect. A day or two afterward the young elephant-driver disappeared from Anapur; and no one knew whether he had been secretly made away with by Nikhal Singh or had vanished of his own accord.

Ten years had now passed; and the affair was overlaid, even in the minds of the Rajahs eldest wives, by a score of later scandals and by the petty happenings of the palace. And when the position of mahout to Ragna, the huge elephant that bore the Rajah himself on all formal occasions, became vacant through death, no one would have connected the half-forgotten Rama Das with the new applicant, Ram Chandar, who vowed his fitness to take charge of Ragna and offered credentials testifying to years of faithful and efficient service to the Maharajah of a state in Bundelcund. And least of all would it have occurred to Nikhal Singh himself that the grave, taciturn, heavy-bearded Ram Chandar and the blithe, beardless Rama Das were the same person.

Somehow, though there were many other applicants, Ram Chander insinuated himself into the desired position. And since he was a competent driver, who had obviously mastered the language of elephants down to its last and most subtle inflection, no one, not even his fellow mahouts, found

reason to disapprove or criticize his appointment. Ragna also appeared to like his new driver; and that ideal confidence and understanding which often exists between the mahout and the animal soon sprang up between these two. Ragna, after the fashion of a well-tutored elephant, was wise and erudite in regard to all that it was proper for him to know; but he learned some new manners and graces beneath the instruction of Ram Chandar; and was even taught in private one or two tricks that are not usually part of the curriculum of a state elephant. Of these latter, no one dreamt; and Ram Chandar preserved an inscrutable silence. And Nikhal Singh was wholly unaware of the strange, sardonic, sinister regard with which he was watched by the new mahout from Bundelcund.

Nikhal Singh had grown fonder than ever of his opium, and cared less and less for other pleasures or distractions. But now, in his fortieth year, for political reasons, it was agreed upon by his ministers that he must take another wife. The Ranee had recently died without leaving him a male heir; and the young daughter of the neighbouring Rajah of Ayalmere was selected as her successor. All the necessary arrangements and elaborate protocols were made; and the day was set for the marriage. Nikhal Singh was secretly bored by the prospect but was publicly resigned to his royal duty. The feelings of the bride, perhaps, were even more problematical.

The day of the marriage dawned in torrid saffron. A great procession coming from Ayalmere was to bring the bride into Anapur; and Nikhal Singh, with another stately procession, was to meet her outside the gates of his capital.

It was a gorgeous ceremony. Nikhal Singh, seated in a golden and jewel-crusted howdah on the superb elephant Ragna, passed through the streets of Anapur followed by the court dignitaries on other elephants and a small army of horsemen, all splendidly caparisoned. There was much firing of

jezails and cannon by the soldiers and banging of musical instruments among the populace. The mahout, Ram Chandar, grave and impassive as usual, sat on Ragna's neck. Nikhal Singh, who had fortified himself with a large lump of his favorite drug, was equally impassive on his brodered cushions in the howdah.

The procession emerged through the open gate of Anapur, and beheld at some distance, in a cloud of summer dust, the approach of the bride and her attendants, forming an array no less magnificent and sumptuous than that which was headed by Nikhal Singh.

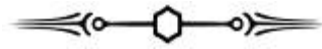
As the two processions neared each other, an event occurred which was not a pre-arranged part of the ceremonial. At a secret signal from Ram Chandar, perceived and understood only by the elephant himself, Ragna suddenly halted, reached into the great howdah with his trunk, seized Nikhal Singh in a tenacious embrace, and haling the Rajah forth in a most undignified and ignominious manner, deposited him on his the knees in the road and forced him to bow his head in the dust before bride's approaching litter. Then, almost before his action was comprehended by the stupefied throng, Ragna raised one of his front hoofs and calmly proceeded to crush the Rajah's head into a flat, formless jelly. Then, trumpeting wildly, menacing all who stood in his way, and apparently defying the frantic signals and commands of his driver, Ragna plunged through the crowd and quickly vanished in the near-by jungle, still carrying Ram Chandar and the empty howdah.

Amid the confusion and consternation that prevailed, it was assumed that Ragna had been seized by the vicious madness to which elephants are sometimes liable. When a semblance of order had been restored, he was followed by a troop of the Rajah's horsemen, armed with jezails. They found him an hour later, browsing peacefully in a jungle-glade without his

driver, and dispatched him with a volley, not trusting his appearance of renewed mildness.

The assumption that Ragna had gone musth was universal; and no one thought of Rama Das and the death of Ameera, ten years before. However, the disappearance of the new mahout, Ram Chandar, was no less a mystery than the earlier vanishment of Rama Das, if anyone had remembered to draw the parallel. The body of Ram Chandar was never found, and no one knew to a certainty whether he had been killed by Ragna in the thick jungle or had run away from Anapur through fear of being held responsible for Ragna's behavior. But mad elephants are prone to wreak their malignity on all accessible victims, even their own mahouts; so it was considered very unlikely that Ram Chandar could have escaped.

The Kiss of Zoraida



WITH ONE BACKWARD look at the bowery suburbs of Damascus, and the street that was peopled only by the long, faint shadows of a crescent moon, Selim dropped from the high wall among the leafing almonds and flowering lilacs of Abdur Ali's garden. The night was almost sultry, and the air was steeped with a distilled languor of voluptuous perfume. Even if he had been in some other garden, in another city, Selim could not have breathed that perfume without thinking of Zoraida, the young wife of Abdur Ali. Evening after evening, for the past fortnight, during her lord and master's absence, she had met him among the lilacs, till he had grown to associate the very odor of her hair and the savor of her lips with their fragrance.

The garden was silent, except for a silver-lisping fountain; and no leaf or petal stirred in the balmy stillness. Abdur Ali had gone to Aleppo on urgent business and was not expected back for several more days; so the slightly tepid thrill of anticipation which Selim felt was untinged by any thought of danger. The whole affair, even from the beginning, had been as safe as that sort of thing could possibly be: Zoraida was Abdur Ali's wife, so there were no jealous women who might tattle to their common lord; and the servants and eunuchs of the household, like Zoraida herself, hated the severe and elderly jewel-merchant. It had been unnecessary even to bribe them into complaisance. Everything and everyone had helped to facilitate the amour. In fact, it was all too easy; and Selim was beginning to weary a little of this heavy-scented garden and the oversweet affection of Zoraida. Perhaps he would not come again after tonight, or tomorrow night... There were other

women, no less fair than the jeweler's wife, whom he had not kissed so often... or had not kissed at all.

He stepped forward among the flower-burdened bushes. Was there a figure standing in the shadow, near the fountain? The figure was dim, and darkly muffled, but it must be Zoraida. She had never failed to meet him there, she was ever the first at their rendezvous. Sometimes she had taken him into the luxurious harem; and sometimes, on warm evenings like this, they had spent their long hours of passion beneath the stars, amid the lilacs and almonds.

As Selim approached, he wondered why she did not rush to meet him, as was her wont. Perhaps she had not yet seen him. He called softly: "Zoraida!"

The waiting figure emerged from the shadow. It was not Zoraida, but Abdur Ali. The faint moon-rays glinted on the dull iron barrel and bright silver frettings of a heavy pistol which the old merchant held in his hand.

"You wish to see Zoraida?" The tone was harsh, metallicly bitter.

Selim, to say the least, was taken aback. It was all too plain that his affair with Zoraida had been discovered, and that Abdur Ali had returned from Aleppo before the appointed time to catch him in a trap. The predicament was more than disagreeable, for a young man who had thought to spend the evening with a much-enamoured mistress. And Abdur Ali's direct query was disconcerting. Selim was unable to think of an apt or judicious answer.

"Come, thou shalt see her." Selim felt the jealous fury, but not the savage irony, that underlay the words. He was full of unpleasant premonitions, most of which concerned himself rather than Zoraida. He knew that he could not look for mercy from this austere and terrible old man; and the probabilities before him were such as to preclude more than a passing thought of what might have befallen, or would befall, Zoraida. Selim was

something of an egoist; and he could hardly have claimed (except for the ear of Zoraida) that he was deeply in love. His self-solicitude, under the circumstances, was perhaps to be expected, even if not wholly to be admired.

Abdur Ali had covered Selim with the pistol. The young man realized uncomfortably that he himself was unarmed, except for his yataghan. Even as he was remembering this, two more figures came forward from amid the lilac-shadows. They were the eunuchs, Cassim and Mustafa, who guarded Abdur Ali's harem, and whom the lovers believed friendly to their intrigue. Each of the giant blacks was armed with a drawn simitar. Mustafa stationed himself at Selim's right hand and Cassim at his left. He could see the whites of their eyes as they watched him with impassable vigilance.

"Now," said Abdur Ali, "you are about to enjoy the singular privilege of being admitted to my harem. This privilege, I believe, you have arrogated to yourself on certain former occasions, and without my knowledge. Tonight I shall grant it myself; though I doubt if there are many who would follow my example. Come: Zoraida is waiting for you, and you must not disappoint her, nor delay any longer. You are later than usual at the rendezvous, as I happen to know."

With the blacks beside him, with Abdur Ali and the leveled pistol in his rear, Selim traversed the dim garden and entered the courtyard of the jewel-merchant's house. It was like a journey in some evil dream and nothing appeared wholly real to the young man. Even when he stood in the harem interior, by the soft light of Saracenic lamps of wrought brass, and saw the familiar divans with their deep-hued cushions and coverings, the rare Turkoman and Persian rugs, the taborets of Indian ebony freaked with precious metals and mother-of-pearl, he could not dispel his feeling of strange dubiety.

In his terror and bewilderment, amid the rich furnishings and somber splendor, he did not see Zoraida for a moment. Abdur Ali perceived his confusion and pointed to one of the couches.

“Hast thou no greeting for Zoraida ?” The low tone was indescribably sardonic and ferocious.

Zoraida, wearing the scanty harem costume of bright silks in which she was wont to receive her lover, was lying on the sullen crimson fabrics of the divan. She was very still, and seemed to be asleep. Her face was whiter than usual, though she had always been a little pale; and the soft, child-like features, with their hint of luxurious roundness, wore a vaguely troubled expression, with a touch of bitterness about the mouth. Selim approached her, but she did not stir.

“Speak to her,” snarled the old man. His eyes burned like two spots of slowly eating fire in the brown and crumpled parchment of his face.

Selim was unable to utter a word. He had begun to surmise the truth; and the situation overwhelmed him with a horrible despair.

“What? Thou hast no greeting for one who loved thee so dearly?” The words were like the dripping of some corrosive acid.

“What has thou done to her?” said Selim after a while. He could not look at Zoraida any longer; nor could he lift his eyes to meet those of Abdur Ali.

“I have dealt with her very gently. As thou seest, I have not marred in any wise the perfection of her beauty — there is no wound, and not even the mark of a blow, on her white body. Was I not more generous...to leave her thus... for thee?”

Selim was not a coward, as men go; yet he gave an involuntary shudder.

“But ... thou hast not told me.”

“It was a rare and precious poison, which slays immediately and with little pain. A drop of it would have been enough — or even so much as still

remains upon her lips. She drank it of her own choice. I was merciful to her — as I shall be to thee.”

“I am at thy disposal,” said Selim with all the hardihood he could muster.

The jewel-dealer’s face became a mask of malignity, like that of some avenging fiend.

“My eunuchs know their master, and they will slice thee limb from limb and member from member if I give the word.”

Selim looked at the two negroes. They returned his gaze with impassive eyes that were utterly devoid of all interest, either friendly or unfriendly. The light ran without a quiver along their gleaming muscles and upon their glittering swords.

“What is thy will? Dost thou mean to kill me?”

“I have no intention of slaying thee myself. Thy death will come from another source.

Selim looked again at the armed eunuchs.

“No, it will not be that — unless you prefer it.”

“In Allah’s name, what doest thou mean, then?” The tawny brown of Selim’s face had turned ashen with horror of suspense.

“Thy death will be one which any true lover would envy,” said Abdur Ali.

Selim was powerless to ask another question. His nerves were beginning to crumble under the ordeal. The dead woman on the couch, the malevolent old man with his baleful half-hints and his obvious implacability, the muscular negroes who would hew a man into collops at their master’s word — all were enough to break down the courage of hardier men than he.

He became aware that Abdur Ali was speaking once more.

“I have brought thee to thy mistress. But it would seem that thou art not a very ardent lover.”

“In the name of the Prophet, cease thy mockery.”

Abdur Ali did not seem to hear the tortured cry.

“It is true, of course, that she could not reply even if thou shouldst speak to her. But her lips are as fair as ever, even if they are growing a little cold with thy unlover-like delay. Hast thou no kiss to lay upon them, in memory of all the other kisses they have taken — and given ?”

Selim was again speechless. Finally:

“But you said there was a poison which—”

“Yes, and I told thee the truth. Even the touch of thy lips to hers, where a trace of the poison lingers, will be enough to cause thy death.” There was an awful gloating in Abdur Ali’s voice.

Selim shivered and looked again at Zoraida. Aside from her utter stillness and pallor, and the faintly bitter expression about the mouth, she differed in no apparent wise from the woman who had lain so often in his arms. Yet the very knowledge that she was dead was enough to make her seem unspeakably strange and even repulsive to Selim. It was hard to associate this still, marmoreal being with the affectionate mistress who had always welcomed him with eager smiles and caresses.

“Is there no other way?” Selim’s question was little louder than a whisper.

“There is none. And you delay too long.” Abdur Ali made a sign to the negroes, who stepped closer to Selim, lifting their swords in the lamplight. “Unless thou dost my bidding, thy hands will be sliced off at the wrists,” the jeweler went on. “The next blows will sever a small portion of each forearm. Then a brief attention will be given to other parts, before returning to the arms. I am sure thou wilt prefer the other death.” Selim stooped above the couch where Zoraida lay. Terror — the abject terror of death — was his one emotion. He had wholly forgotten his love for Zoraida, had

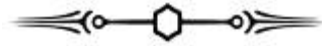
forgotten her kisses and endearments. He feared the strange, pale woman before him as much as he had once desired her. "Make haste." The voice of Abdur Ali was steely as the lifted simitars.

Selim bent over and kissed Zoraida on the mouth. Her lips were not entirely cold, but there was a queer, bitter taste. Of course, it must be the poison. The thought was hardly formulated when a searing agony seemed to run through all his veins. He could no longer see Zoraida, in the blinding flames that appeared before him and filled the room like ever-widening suns; and he did not know that he had fallen forward on the couch across her body. Then the flames began to shrink with great swiftness and went out in a swirl of soft gloom. Selim felt that he was sinking into a great gulf, and that someone (whose name he could not remember) was sinking beside him. Then, all at once, he was alone, and was losing even the sense of solitude... till there was nothing but darkness and oblivion.

The Tale of Sir John Maundeville

OR

The Kingdom of the Worm



NOW IN HIS journeying Sir John Maundeville had passed well to one side of that remarkable province in the kingdom of Abchaz which was called Hanyson; and, unless he was greatly deceived by those of whom he had inquired the way, could deem himself within two days' travel of that neighboring realm of Georgia.

He had seen the river that flowed out from Hanyson, a land of hostile idolators on which there lay the curse of perpetual darkness; and wherein, it was told, the voices of people, the crowing of cocks and the neighing of horses had sometimes been heard by those who approached its confines. But he had not paused to investigate the verity of these marvels; since the direct route of his journey was through another region; and also Hanyson was a place which no man, not even the most hardy, would care to enter without need.

However, as he pursued his wayfaring with the two Armenian Christians who formed his retinue, he began to hear from the inhabitants of that portion of Abchaz the rumor of an equally dread demesne, named Antehar, lying before him on the road to Georgia. The tales they told were both vague and frightful, and were of varying import; some said that this country was a desolation peopled only by the liches of the dead and by loathly phantoms; others, that it was subject to the ghouls and afrits, who devoured the dead and would suffer no living mortal to trespass upon their

dominions; and still others spoke of things all too hideous to be described, and of dire necromancies that prevailed even as the might of emperors doth prevail in more usually ordered lands. And the tales agreed only in this, that Antchar had been within mortal memory one of the fairest domains of Abchaz, but had been utterly laid waste by an unknown pestilence, so that its high cities and broad fields were long since abandoned to the desert and to such devils and other creatures as inhabit waste places. And the tellers of the tales agreed in warning Sir John to avoid this region and to take the road which ran deviously to the north of Antchar; for Antehar was a place into which no man had gone in latter times.

The good knight listened gravely to all these, as was his wont; but being a stout Christian, and valorous withal, he would not suffer them to deter him from his purpose. Even when the last inhabited village had been left behind, and he came to the division of the ways, and saw verily that the highway into Antchar had not been trodden by man or beast for generations, he refused to change his intention but road forward stoutly while the Armenians followed with much protest and trepidation.

Howbeit, he was not blind to the sundry disagreeable tokens that began to declare themselves along the way. There were neither trees; herbs nor lichens anywhere, such as would grow in any wholesome land; but low hills mottled with a leprosy of salt, and ridges bare as the bones of the dead.

Anon he came to a pass where the hills were strait and steep on each hand, with pinnacled cliffs of a dark stone crumbling slowly into dust and taking shapes of wild horror and strangeness, of demonry and Satanry as they crumbled. There were faces in the stone, having the semblance of ghouls or goblins, that appeared to move and twist as the travellers went by; and Sir John and his companions were troubled by the aspect of these faces and the similitudes which they bore to one another. So much alike, indeed,

were many of them, that it seemed as if their first exemplars were preceding the wayfarers, to mock them anew at each turn. And aside from those which were like ghouls or goblins, there were others having the features of heathen idols, uncouth and hideous to behold; and others still that were like the worm-gnawed visages of the dead; and these also appeared to repeat themselves on every hand in a doubtful arid wildering fashion.

The Armenians would have turned back, for they swore that the rocks were alive and endowed with motion, in a land where naught else was living; and they sought to dissuade Sir John from his project. But he said merely, "Follow me, an ye will" and rode onward among the rocks and pinnacles.

Now, in the ancient dust of the unused road, they saw the tracks of a creature that was neither man nor any terrestrial beast; and the tracks were of such unwonted shape and number, and were so monstrous withal, that even Sir John was disquieted thereby; and perceiving them, the Armenians murmured more openly than before.

And now, as they pursued their way, the pinnacles of the pass grew tall as giants, and were riven into the likeness of mighty limbs and bodies, some of which were headless and others with heads of Typhoean enormity. And their shadows deepened between the travellers and the sun, to more than the umbrage of shadows cast by rocks. And in the darkest depth of the ravine, Sir John and his followers met a solitary jackal, which fled them not in the manner of its kind but passed them with articulate words, in a voice hollow and sepulchral as that of a demon, bidding them to turn back, since the land before them was an interdicted realm. All were much startled thereat, considering that this was indeed a thing of enchantment, for a jackal to speak thus, and being against nature, was fore-ominous of ill and peril. And the Armenians cried out, saying they would go no further; and when the

jackal had passed from sight, they fled after it, spurring their horses like men who were themselves ridden by devils.

Seeing them thus abandon him, Sir John was somewhat wroth; and also he was perturbed by the warning of the jackal; and he liked not the thought of faring alone into Antchar. But, trusting in our Saviour to forfend him against all harmful enchantments and the necromancies of Satan, he rode on among the rocks until he came forth at length from their misshapen shadows; and emerging thus, he saw before him a grey plain that was like the ashes of some dead land under extinguished heavens.

At sight of this region, his heart misgave him sorely, and he misliked it even more than the twisted faces of the rocks and riven forms of the pinnacles. For here the bones of men, of horses and camels, had marked the way with their pitiable whiteness; and the topmost branches of long dead trees arose like supplicative arms from the sand that had sifted upon the older gardens. And here there were ruinous houses, with doors open to the high-drifting desert, and mausoleums sinking slowly in the dunes. And here, as Sir John rode forward, the sky darkened above him, though riot with the passage of clouds or the coming of the simoon, but rather with the strange dusk of midmost eclipse, wherein the shadows of himself and his horse were blotted out, and the tombs and houses were wan as phantoms.

Sir John had not ridden much further, when he met a horned viper or cerastes, crawling toilsomely away from Antchar in the deep dust of the road. And the viper spoke as it passed him, saying with a human voice, "Be warned, and go not onward to Antchar, for this is a realm forbidden to all mortal beings except the dead."

Now did Sir John address himself in prayer to God the Highest, and to Jesus Christ our Saviour and all the blessed Saints, knowing surely that he had arrived in a place that was subject to Satanical dominion. And while he

prayed, the gloom continued to thicken, till the road before him was half nighted and was no longer easy to discern. And though he would have still ridden on, his charger halted in the gloom and would not respond to the spur, but stood and trembled like one who is smitten with palsy.

Then, from the twilight that was nigh to darkness, there came gigantic figures, muffled and silent and having, as he thought, neither mouths nor eyes beneath the brow-folds of their sable cerements. They uttered no word, nor could Sir John bespeak them in the fear that came upon him; and likewise he was powerless to draw his sword. And they plucked him from his saddle with fleshless hands, and led him away, half swooning at the horror of their touch, on paths that he perceived only with the dim senses of one who goes down into the shadow of death. And he knew not how far they led him nor in what direction; and he heard no sound as he went, other than the screaming of his horse far off, like a soul in mortal dread and agony: for the footfalls of those who had taken him were soundless, and he could not tell if they were phantoms or haply were veritable demons. A coldness blew upon him, but without the whisper or sighing of wind; and the air he breathed was dense with corruption and such odors as may emanate from a broken charnel.

For a time, in the faintness that had come upon him, he saw not the things that were standing beside the way, nor the shrouded shapes that went by in funeral secrecy. Then, recovering his senses a little, he perceived that there were houses about him and the streets of a town, though these were but scantily to be discerned in the night that had fallen without bringing the stars. However, he saw, or deemed, that there were high mansions and broad thoroughfares and markets; and among them, as he went on, a building that bore the appearance of a great palace, with a facade that glimmered vaguely, and domes and turrets half swallowed up by the lowering darkness.

As he neared the facade, Sir John saw that the glimmering came from within and was cast obscurely through open doors and between broad-spaced pillars. Too feeble was the light for torch or cresset, too dim for any lamp; and Sir John marvelled amid his faintness and terror. But when he had drawn closer still, he saw that the strange gleaming was like the phosphor bred by the putrefaction of a charnel.

Beneath the guidance of those who held him helpless, he entered the building. They led him through a stately hall, in whose carved columns and ornate furniture the opulence of kings was manifest; and thence he came into the great audience-room, with a throne of gold and ebony set on a high dais, all of which was illumed by no other light than the glimmering of decay. And the throne was tenanted, nor by any human lord of sultan, but a gray, prodigious creature, of height and bulk exceeding those of man, and having in all its over-swollen form the exact similitude of a charnel-worm. And the worm was alone, and except for the worm and Sir John and those beings who had brought him thither, the great chamber was empty as a mausoleum of old days, whose occupants were long since consumed by corruption.

Then, standing there with a horror upon him as no man had ever envisaged, Sir John became aware that the worm was scrutinizing him severely, with little eyes deep-folded in the obscene bloating of its face, and then, with a dreadful and solemn voice, it addressed him, saying:

“I am king of Antehar, by virtue of having conquered and devoured the mortal ruler thereof, as well as all those who were his subjects. Know then that this land is mine and that the intrusion of the living is unlawful and not readily to be condoned. The rashness and folly thou hast shown in thus coming here is verily most egregious; since thou wert warned by the people of Abchaz, and warned anew by the jackal and the viper which thou didst

meet on the road to Antchar. Thy temerity hath earned a condign punishment. And before I suffer thee to go hence, I decree that thou shalt lie for a term among the dead, and dwell as they dwell, in a dark sepulcher, and learn the manner of their abiding and the things which none should behold with living eyes. Yea, still alive, it shall be thine to descend and remain in the very midst of death and putrefaction, for such length of time as seemeth meet to correct thy folly and punish thy presumption.”

Sir John was one of the worthiest knights of Christendom, and his valor was beyond controversy. But when he heard the speech of the throned worm, and the judgement that it passed upon him, his fear became so excessive that once again he was nigh to swooning. And, still in this state, he was taken hence by those who had brought him to the audience-room. And somewhere in the outer darkness, in a place of tombs and graves and cenotaphs beyond the dim town, he was flung into a deep sepulcher of stone, and the brazen door of the sepulcher was closed upon him.

Lying there through the seasonless midnight, Sir John was companioned only by an unseen cadaver and by those ministrants of decay who were not yet wholly done with their appointed task. Himself as one half dead, in the sore extremity of his horror and loathing, he could not tell if it were day or night in Antchar; and in all the term of endless hours that he lay there, he heard no sound, other than the beating of his own heart, which soon became insufferably loud, and oppressed him like the noise and tumult of a great throng.

Appalled by the clamor of his heart, and affrighted by the thing which lay in perpetual silence beside him, andwhelmed by the awesomeness and dire necromancy of all that had befallen him, Sir John was prone to despair, and scant was his hope of returning from that imprisonment amid the dead, or of standing once more under the sun as a living man. It was his to learn

the voidness of death, to share the abomination of desolation, and to comprehend the unutterable mysteries of corruption; and to do all this not as one who is a mere insensible cadaver, but with soul and body still inseparate. His flesh crept, and his spirit cringed within him, as he felt the crawling of worms that went avidly to the dwindling corpse or came away in glugged slowness. And it seemed to Sir John at that time (and at all times thereafter) that the condition of his sojourn in the tomb was verily to be accounted a worse thing than death.

At last, when many hours or days had gone over him, leaving the tomb's darkness unchanged by the entrance of any beam or the departure of any shadow, Sir John was aware of a sullen clangor, and knew that the brazen door had been opened. And now, for the first time, by the dimness of twilight that had entered the tomb, he saw in all its piteousness and repulsion the thing with which he had abode so long. In the sickness that fell upon him at this sight, he was haled forth from the sepulcher by those who had thrust him therein; and, fainting once more with the terror of their touch, and shrinking from their gigantic shadowy stature and cerements whose black folds revealed no human visage or form, he was led through Antchar along the road whereby he had come into that dolorous realm.

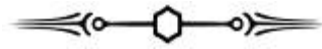
His guides were silent as before; and the gloom which lay upon the land was even as when he had entered it, and was like the umbrage of some eternal occultation. But at length, in the very place where he had been taken captive, he was left to retrace his own way and to fare alone through the land of ruinous gardens toward the defile of the crumbling rocks.

Weak though he was from his confinement, and all bemazed with the things which had befallen him, he followed the road till the darkness lightened once more and he came forth from its penumbral shadow beneath a pale sun. And somewhere in the waste he met his charger, wandering

through the sunken fields that were covered up by the sand; and he mounted the charger and rode hastily away from Antchar through the pass of the strange boulders with mocking forms and faces. And after a time he came once more to the northern road by which travellers commonly went to Georgia; and he was rejoined by the two Armenians, who had waited on the confines of Antchar, praying for his secure deliverance.

Long afterwards, when he had returned from his wayfaring in the East and among the peoples of remote isles, he told of the kingdom of Abchaz in the book that related to his travels; and also he wrote the rein concerning the province of Hanyson. But he made no mention of Antchar, that kingdom of darkness and decay ruled by the throned worm.

The Ghoul



DURINGTHE REIGN OF the Caliph Vathek, a young man of good repute and family, named Nouredin Hassan, was hauled before the Cadi Alimed ben Becar at Bussorah. Now Nouredin was a comely youth, of open mind and gentle mien; and great was the astonishment of the Cadi and of all others present when they heard the charges that were preferred against him. He was accused of having slain seven people one by one, on seven successive nights, and of having left the corpses in a cemetery near Bussorah, where they were found lying with their bodies and members devoured in a fearsome manner, as if by jackals. Of the people he was said to have slain, three were women two were traveling merchants, one was a mendicant, and one a graved digger.

Abmed ben Becar was filled with the learning and wisdom of honorable years, and withal was possessed of much perspicacity. But he was deeply perplexed by the strangeness and atrocity of these crimes and by the mild demeanor and well-bred aspect of Nouredin Hassan, which he could in no wise reconcile with them. He heard in silence the testimony of witnesses who had seen Nouredin bearing on his shoulders the body of a woman at yester-eve in the cemetery; and others who on several occasions had observed him coming from the neighborhood at unseemly hours when only thieves and murderers would be abroad. Then, having considered all these, he questioned the youth closely.

“Nouredin Hassan,” he said, “thou hast been charged with crimes of exceeding foulness, which thy bearing and lineaments belie. Is there haply some explanation of these things by which thou canst clear thyself, or in

some measure mitigate the heinousness of thy deeds, if so it be that thou art guilty? I adjure thee to tell me the truth in this matter.”

Now Nouredin Hassan arose before the Cadi; and the heaviness of extreme shame and sorrow was visible on his countenance.

“Alas, O Cadi,” he replied, “for the charges that have been brought against me are indeed true. It was I and no other, who slew these people; nor can I offer an extenuation of my act.”

The Cadi was sorely grieved and astonished when he heard this answer.

“I must perforce believe thee,” he said sternly. “But thou hast confessed a thing which will make thy name hence forward an abomination in the ears and mouths of men. I command thee to tell me why these crimes were committed, and what offense these persons had given thee, or what injury they had done to thee; or if perchance thou slewest them for gain, like a common robber.”

“There was neither offense given nor injury wrought by any of them against me,” replied Nouredin. “And I did not kill them for their money or belongings or apparel, since I had no need of such things, and, aside from that, have always been an honest man.”

“Then,” cried Ahmed ben Becar, greatly puzzled, “what was thy reason if it was none of these ?”

Now the face of Nouredin Hassan grew heavier still with sorrow; and he bowed his head in a shamefaced manner that bespoke the utterness of profound remorse. And standing thus before the Cadi, he told this story:

The reversals of fortune, O Cadi, are swift and grievous, and beyond the foreknowing or advertence of man. Alas! for less than a fortnight ago I was the happiest and most guiltless of mortals, with no thought of wrongdoing toward anyone. I was wedded to Amina, the daughter of the jewel-merchant Aboul Cogia; and I loved her deeply and was much beloved

by her in turn; and moreover we were at this time anticipating the birth of our first child. I had inherited from my father a rich estate and many slaves; the cares of life were light upon my shoulders; and I had, it would seem, every reason to count myself among those Allah had blest with an earthly foretaste of Heaven.

Judge, then, the excessive nature of my grief when Amina died in the same hour when she was to have been delivered. From that time, in the dire extremity of my lamentation, I was as one bereft of light and knowledge; I was deaf to all those who sought to condole with me, and blind to their friendly offices.

After the burial of Amina my sorrow became a veritable madness, and I wandered by night to her grave in the cemetery near Bussorah and flung myself prostrate before the newly lettered tombstone, on the earth that had been digged that very day. My senses deserted me, and I knew not how long I remained on the damp clay beneath the cypresses, while the horn of a decrecent moon arose in the heavens.

Then, in my stupor of abandonment, I heard a terrible voice that bade me rise from the ground on which I was lying. And lifting my head a little, I saw a hideous demon of gigantic frame and stature, with eyes of scarlet fire beneath brows that were coarse as tangled rootlets, and fangs that overhung a cavernous mouth, and earth-black teeth longer and sharper than those of the hyena. And the demon said to me:

“I am a ghniil, and it is my office to devour the bodies of the dead. I have now come to claim the corpse that was interred today beneath the soil on which thou art lying in a fashion so unmannerly. Begone, for I have fasted since yester-night, and I am much anhungered.”

Now, at the sight of this demon, and the sound of his dreadful voice, and the still more dreadful meaning of his words, I was like to have swooned

with terror on the cold clay. But I recovered myself in a manner, and besought him, saying:

“Spare this grave, I implore thee; for she who lies buried therein is dearer to me than any living mortal; and I would not that her fair body should be the provender of an unclean demon such as thou.”

At this the ghoul was angered, and I thought that he would have done me some bodily violence. But again I besought him, swearing by Allah and Mohammed with many solemn oaths that I would grant him anything procurable and would do for him any favor that lay in the power of man if he would leave undespoiled the new-made grave of Amina. And the ghoul was somewhat mollified, and he said:

“If thou wilt indeed perform for me a certain service, I shall do as thou askest.” And I replied:

“There is no service, whatsoever its nature, that I will not do for thee in this connection, and I pray thee to name thy desire.”

Then the ghoul said: “It is this, that thou shalt bring me each night, for eight successive nights, the body of one whom thou hast slain with thine own hand. Do this, and I shall neither devour nor dig the body that lies interred hereunder.”

Now was I seized by utter horror and despair, since I had bound myself in all honor to grant the ghoul his hideous requirement. And I begged him to change the terms of the stipulation, saying to him:

“Is it needful to thee, O eater of corpses, that the bodies should be those of people whom I myself have slain?”

And the ghoul said: “Yea, for all others would be the natural provender of myself or of my kin in any event. I adjure thee by the promise thou hast given to meet me here tomorrow night, when darkness has wholly fallen or as soon thereafter as thou art able, bringing the first of the eight bodies.”

So saying, he strode off among the cypresses, and began to dig in another newly made grave at a little distance from that of Amina.

I left the graveyard in even direr anguish than when I had come, thinking of that which I must do in fulfilment of my sworn promise, to preserve the body of Amina from the demon. I know not how I survived the ensuing day, torn as I was between sorrow for the dead and my horror of the coming night with its repugnant duty.

When darkness had descended I went forth by stealth to a lonely road near the cemetery; and waiting there amid the low-grown branches of the trees, I slew the first passer with a sword and carried his body to the spot appointed by the ghoul. And each night thereafter, for six more nights, I returned to the same vicinity and repeated this deed, slaying always the very first who came, whether man or woman, or merchant or beggar or gravedigger. And the ghoul awaited me on each occasion, and would begin to devour his provender in my presence, with small thanks and scant ceremony. Seven persons did I slay in all, till only one was wanting to complete the agreed number; and the person I slew yester-night was a woman, even as the witnesses have testified. All this I did with utmost repugnance and regret, and sustained only by the remembrance of my plighted word and the fate which would befall the corpse of Amina if I should break the bond.

This, O Cadi, is all my story. Alas! For these lamentable crimes have availed me not, and I have failed in wholly keeping my bargain with the demon, who will doubtless this night consume the body of Amina in lieu of the one corpse that is still lacking. I resign myself to thy judgment, O Ahmed ben Becar, and I beseech thee for no other mercy than that of death, wherewith to terminate my double grief and my twofold remorse.

When Nouredin Hassan had ended his narrative, the amazement of all who had heard him was verily multiplied, since no man could remember hearing a stranger tale. And the Cadi pondered for a long time and then gave judgment, saying:

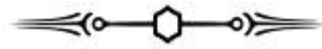
“I must needs marvel at thy story, but the crimes thou hast committed are none the less heinous, and Iblis himself would stand aghast before them. However, some allowance must be made for the fact that thou hadst given thy word to the ghoul and wast bound as it were in honor to fulfil his demand, no matter how horrible its nature. And allowance must likewise be made for thy connubial grief which caused thee to forfend thy wife’s body from the demon, Yet I cannot judge thee guiltless, though I know not the punishment which is merited in a case so utterly without parallel. Therefore, I set thee free, with this injunction, that thou shalt make atonement for thy crimes in the fashion that seemeth best to thee, and shalt render justice to thyself and to others in such degree as thou art able.”

“I thank thee for this mercy,” replied Nouredin Hassan; and he then withdrew from the court amid the wonderment of all who were present. There was much debate when he had gone, and many were prone to question the wisdom of the Cadi’s decision. Some there were who maintained that Nouredin should have been sentenced to death without delay for his abominable actions though others argued for if the sanctity of his oath to the ghoul, and would have exculpated him altogether or in part. And tales were told and instances were cited regarding the habits of ghouls and the strange plight of men who had surprised such demons in their nocturnal delvings. And again the discussion returned to Nouredin, and the judgment of the Cadi was once more upheld or assailed with divers arguments. But amid all this, Ahmed ben Becar was silent, saying only:

“Wait, for this man will render justice to himself and to all others concerned, as far as the rendering thereof is possible.”

So indeed, it happened, for on the morning of the next day another body was found in the cemetery near Bussorah lying half-devoured on the grave of Nouredin Hassan’s wife, Amina. And the body was that of Nouredin, self-slain, who in this manner had not only fulfilled the injunction of the Cadi but had also kept his bargain with the ghoul by providing the required number of corpses.

Told in the Desert



OUT OF THE fiery furnace of the desert sunset, he came to meet our caravan. He and his camel were a single silhouette of shadow-like thinness that emerged above the golden-crested dunes and disappeared by turns in their twilight-gathering hollows. When he descended the last dune and drew near, we had paused for the night, we were pitching our black tents and lighting our little fires.

The man and his dromedary were like mummies that could find no repose in the subterranean of death, that had wandered abroad beneath the goading of a cryptic spur, ever since the first division of the desert from the town. The face of the man was withered and blackened as by the torrefaction of a thousand flames; his beard was grey as ashes; and his eyes were expiring embers. His clothing was like tatters of the ancient dead, like the spoils of ghoulish rag-pickers. His camel was a mangy, moth-eaten skeleton such as might bear the souls of the damned on their dolorous ride to the realms of Iblis.

We greeted him in the name of Allah and bade him welcome. He shared our meal of dates and coffee and dried goat-flesh; and later, when we sat in a circle beneath the crowding stars, he told us his tale in a voice that had somehow taken on the loneliness, the eerie quavers and disconsolate overtones of the desert wind, as it seeks among infinitely parching horizons for the fertile, spicy valleys it has lost and cannot find.

Of my birth, my youth, and the appellation by which I was known and perhaps renowned among men, it would now be bootless to speak: for those days are one in remoteness with the reign of Al Raschid, they have gone by

like the Afrit-built halls of Suleiman. And in the bazaars or in the harems of my natal city, none would recall me; and if one spoke my name, it would be as a dying and never-repeated echo. And my own memories grew dim like the fires of hesternal wanderings, on which the sand are blown by an autumn gale.

But, though none will remember my songs, I was once a poet; and like other poets in their prime, I sang of vernal roses and autumnal rose-leaves, of the breasts of dead queens and the mouths of living cup-bearers, or stars that seek the fabled ocean-isles, and caravans that follow the eluding and illusory horizons. And because I was fevered with the strange disquietude of youth and poesy, for which there is neither name nor appeasement, I left the city of my boyhood, dreaming of other cities where wine and fame would be sweeter, and the lips of women more desirable.

It was a gallant and merry caravan with which I set forth in the month of the flowering of almonds. Wealthy and brave were the merchants with whom I travelled; and though they were lovers of gold and wrought ivory, of rugs and damascus blades and olibanum, they also loved my songs and could never weary of hearing them. And though our pilgrimage was long, it was evermore beguiled with recital of odes and telling of tales; and time was somehow cheated of its days, and distance of its miles, as only the divine necromancy of song can cheat them. And the merchants told me stories of the far-off, glamorous city which was our goal; and hearkening to their recountal of its splendours and delights, and pondering my own fancies, I was well content with the palmless leagues as they faded behind our dromedaries.

Alas! for we were never to behold the bourn of our journey, with its auriphrygiate domes that were said to ascend above the greening of paradisal trees, and its minarets of nacre beyond waters of jade. We were

waylaid by the fierce tribesmen of the desert in a deep valley between hills; and though we fought valiantly, they bore us down from our hamstrung camels with their over-numbering spears; and taking our corded bales of merchandise, and deeming us all securely dead, they left us to the gier-eagles of the sand.

All but myself, indeed, has perished; and sorely wounded in the side, I lay among the dead as one on whom there descends in the pall-like shadow of Azrael. But when the robbers had departed, I somehow stanchd my streaming wound with tatters of my torn raiment; and seeing that none stirred among my companions, I left them and tottered away on the route of our journey, sorrowing that so brave a caravan should have come to a death so inglorious. And beyond the defile in which we had been overtaken with such dastardy, I found a camel who had strayed away during the conflict. Even as myself, the animal was maimed, and it limped on three legs and left a trail of blood. But I made it kneel, and mounted it.

Of the course that ensued I remember little. Blinded with pain and weakness, I heeded not the route that the camel followed, whether it were the track of caravans or a desert-ending path of Bedouins or jackals. But dimly I recalled how the merchants had told me at morn that there were two days of travelling in a desolation where the way was marked by serried bones, ere we should reach the next oasis. And I knew not how I should survive so arduous a journey, wounded and without water; but I clung dizzily to the camel.

The red demons of thirst assailed me; and fever came, and delirium, to people the waste with phantasmagoric shadows. And I fled through aeons from the frightful immemorial Things that held lordship of the desert, and would have proffered me the green, beguiling cups of an awful madness with Their bone-white hands. And though I fled. They dogged me always;

and I heard Them gibbering all around me in the air that had turned to blood-red flame.

There were mirages on the waste; there were lucent meres and palms of fretted beryl that hovered always at an unattainable distance. I saw them in the interludes of my delirium; and one there was at length, which appeared greener and fairer than the rest; but I deemed it also an illusion. Yet it faded not nor receded like the others; and in each interval of my phantom-clouded fever it drew nearer still. And thinking it still a mirage, I approached the palms and the water; and a great blackness fell upon me, like the web of oblivion from the hands of the final Weaver; and I was henceforth bereft of sight and knowledge.

Waking, I deemed perforce that I had died and was in a sequestered nook of Paradise. For surely the sward on which I lay, and the waving verdure about me, were lovelier than those of earth; and the face that leaned above me was that of the youngest and most compassionate houri. But when I saw my wounded camel grazing not far away, and felt the reviving pain of my own hurt, I knew that I still lived; and that the seeming mirage had been a veritable oasis.

Ah! Fair and kind as any houri was she who had found me lying on the desert's verge, when the riderless camel came to her hut amid the pals. Seeing that I had awakened from my swoon, she brought me water and fresh dates, and smiled like a mother as I ate and drank. And, uttering little cries of horror and pity, she bound my wound with the sootherness of healing balsams.

Her voice was gentle as her eyes; and her eyes were those of a dove that has dwelt aways in a vale of myrrh and cassia. When I had revived a little, she told me her name, which was Neria; and I deemed it lovelier and more melodious than the names of the sultanas who are most renowned in song,

and remotest in time and fable. She said that she had lived from infancy with her parents amid the palms; and now her parents were dead, and there was none to companion her except the birds that nested and sang in the verdant frondage.

How shall I tell of the life that began for me now, while the spear-wound was mending? How shall I tell of the innocent grace, the child-like beauty, the maternal tenderness of Neria? It was a life remote from all the fevers of the world, and pure from every soilure; it was infinitely sweet and secure, as if in the whole of time and space there were no others than ourselves and naught that could ever trouble our happiness. My love for her, and hers for me, was inevitable as the flowering of the palms and their fruiting. Our hearts were drawn to each other with no shadow of doubt or reluctance; and the meeting of our mouths was simple as that of roses blown together by a summer wind.

We felt no needs, no hungers, other than those which were amply satisfied by the crystal well-water, by the purple fruit of the trees, and by each other. Ours were the dawns that poured through the feathering emerald of fronds; and the sunsets whose amber was flung on a blossom-purified sward more delicate than the rugs of Bokhara. Ours was the divine monotony of contentment, ours were the kisses and endearments ever the same in sweetness yet illimitable various. Ours was a slumber enchanted by cloudless stars, and caresses without denial or regret. We spoke of naught but our love and the little things that filled our days; yet the words we uttered were more than the weighty discourse of the learned and the wise. I sang no more, I forgot my odes and ghazals; for life itself had become a sufficing music.

The annals of happiness are without event. I know not how long it was that I dwelt with Neria; for the days were molten together in a dulcet

harmony of peace and rapture. I remember not if they were few or many; since time was touched by a supernal sorcery, and was no longer time.

Alas! for the tiny whisper of discontent that awakens sooner or later in the bosoms of the blest, that is heard through the central melodies of heaven! There came a day when the little oasis seemed no longer the infinite paradise I had dreamt, when the kisses of Neria were as honey too often tasted, when her bosom was a myrrh too often breathed. The sameness of the days was no longer divine, the remoteness was no longer security but a prison-house. Beyond the fringed horizon of the trees there hovered the opal and marble dream of the storied cities I had sought in former time; and the voices of fame, the tones of sultana-like women, besought me with far, seductive murmurs. I grew sad and silent and distraught; and, seeing the change that was on me, Neria saddened also and watched me with eyes that had darkened like nocturnal wells in which there lingers a single star. But she uttered no breath of reproach or remonstrance.

At last, with halting words, I told her of my longing to depart; and, hypocrite that I was, I spoke of urgent duties that called me and would not be denied. And I promised with many oaths to return as soon as these duties would permit. The pallor of Neria's face, and the darkening of her violet-shadowed eyes, were eloquent of mortal sorrow. But she said only, 'Go not, I pray thee. For if thou goest, thou shalt not find me again.'

I laughed at her words and kissed her; but her lips were cold as those of the dead, they were unresponsive as if the estranging miles had already intervened. And I too was sorrowful when I rode away on my dromedary.

Of that which followed there is much, and yet little, to tell. After many days among the veering boundaries of the sand, I came to a far city; and there I abode for awhile and found in a measure the glory and delight of which I had dreamed. But amid the loud and clamouring bazaars, and across

the silken whisper of harems, there returned to me the parting words of Neria; and her eyes besought me through the flame of golden lamps and the luster of opulent attire; and a nostalgia fell upon me for the lost oasis and the lips of abandoned love. And because of it I knew no peace; and after a time I returned to the desert.

I retraced my way with exceeding care, by the dunes and remotely scattered wells that marked the route. But when I thought to have reached the oasis, and to see again the softly waving palms above Neria's abode, and the glimmering waters beside it, I saw no more than a stretch of featureless sand, where a lonely, futile wind was writing and erasing its aimless furrows. And I sought across the sand in every direction, till it seemed that I must overtake the very horizons as they fled; but I could not find a single palm, nor a blade of grass that was like the blossomy sward on which I had lain or wandered with Neria; and the wells to which I came were brackish with desolation and could never have held the crystalline sweetness of the well from which I had drunk with her...

Since then, I know not how many suns have crossed the brazen hell of the desert; nor how many moons have gone down on the waters of mirage and marah. But still I seek the oasis; and still I lament the hour of careless folly in which I forsook its perfect paradise. To no man, mayhap, it is given to attain twice the happiness and security, remote from all that can trouble or assail, which I knew with Neria in a bygone year. And woe to him who abandons such, who becomes a voluntary exile from an irretrievable Aidann. For him, henceforward, there are only the fading visions of memory, the tortures and despairs and illusions of the quested miles, the waste whereon there falls no lightest shadow of any leaf, and the wells whose taste is fire and madness...

We were all silent when the stranger ceased; and no one cared to speak. But among us all there was none who had not remembered the face of her to whom he would return when the caravan had ended its wayfaring.

After awhile, we slept; and we thought that the stranger also slumbered. But awaking before dawn, when a horned moon was low above the sands, we saw that the man and his dromedary had disappeared. And far-off in the ghostly light a doubtful shadow passed from dune to dune like a fever-driven phantom. And it seemed to us that the shadow was the single silhouette of a camel and its rider.

Hyperborea (1971)



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The Desolation of Soom

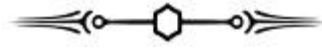
The Abomination of Desolation

Please note: all other works in this collection were reprinted from previous books.

The Desolation of Soom

OR

The Abomination of Desolation



THE DESERT OF Soom is said to lie at the world's unchartable extreme, between the lands that are little known and those that are scarcely ever conjectured. It is dreaded by travelers, for its bare and ever-moving sands are without oases, and a strange horror is rumored to dwell among them. Of this horror many tales are told and nearly all the tales are different. Some say that the thing has neither visible form nor audible voice, and others that it is a dire chimera with multitudinous heads, horns and tails, and a tongue whose sound is like the tolling of bells in deep funereal vaults. Of the caravans and solitary wanderers who have ventured into Soom, none has returned without a story to tell; and some have never returned at all, or have come back with brains devoured to madness by the terror and vertigo of infinite empty space... Yes, there are many tales, of a thing that follows furtively or with the pandemonium of a thousand devils; of a thing that lurks and lies in wait behind the unstable dunes; of a thing that roars or whispers balefully from the sand or from the wind; or stirs unseen in the coiling silence; or falls from the air like a crushing incubus; or yawns like a sudden pit before the feet of the traveler.

But once on a time there were two lovers who came to the desert of Soom, and who had occasion to cross the sterile sands. They did not know the evil rumor of the place; and since they had found an abiding Eden in each other's eyes, it is perhaps doubtful if they even knew that they were passing through a desert. And they alone, of all who dared this fearsome

desolation, have no tale to relate of any troublous thing, of any horror that followed or lurked before them, either seen or unseen, inaudible or heard; and for them there was no multi-headed chimera, no yawning pit or incubus, and never could they comprehend the stories that were told by less fortunate wayfarers.

Poseidonis (1973)

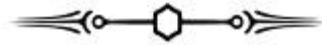


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The Muse of Atlantis

Please note: all other works in this collection were reprinted from previous books.

The Muse of Atlantis



WILL YOU NOT join me in Atlantis, where we will go down through streets of blue and yellow marble to the wharves of orichalch, and choose us a galley with a golden Eros for figure-head, and sails of Tyrian sendal? With mariners that knew Odysseus, and beautiful amber-breasted slaves from the mountain-vales of Lemuria, we will lift anchor for the unknown fortunate isles of the outer sea; and, sailing in the wake of an opal sunset, will lose that ancient land in the glaucous twilight, and see from our couch of ivory and satin the rising of unknown stars and perished planets. Perhaps we will not return, but will follow the tropic summer from isle to halcyon isle, across the amaranthine seas of myth and fable; we will eat the lotus, and the fruit of lands whereof Odysseus never dreamt; and drink the pallid wines of faery, grown in a vale of perpetual moonlight. I will find for you a necklace of rosy-tinted pearls, and a necklace of yellow rubies, and crown you with precious corals that have the semblance, of sanguine-coloured blossoms. We will roam in the marts of forgotten cities of jasper, and carnelian-built ports beyond Cathay; and I will buy you a gown of peacock azure damascened with copper and gold and vermilion; and a gown of black samite with runes of orange, woven by fantastic sorcery without the touch of hands, in a dim land of spells and philtres.

Miscellaneous Short Stories



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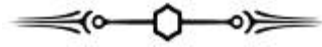
The Dart of Rasasfa



Smith, c. 1959

The Flirt

First published in 1921



SOMEONE INTRODUCED HIM to her as she stepped from the surf at the bathing beach. She was blonde as a daffodil, and her one-piece suit of vivid green clung to her closely as a folded leaf to the flower-bud. She smiled upon him, with an air of tender and subtle sadness; and her slow, voluptuous eyelids fell before his gaze with the pensive languor of closing petals. There was a diffidence and seduction in the [virginal] curve of her cheek; she was modest and demure, with an under note of elusive provocation; and her voice was a plaintive soprano.

Twenty minutes later, they sat among the dunes at the end of the beach, where a white wall of sand concealed them from the crowd. Her bathing suit, only half-dry, still clung and glistened; but their flirtation had already ripened and flourished with an ease that surprised him.

“Surely I knew you in ancient Greece,” he was saying. “Your hair retains the sunlight of the Golden Age, your eyes the blue of perished heavens that shone on the vale of Tempe. Tell me, what queen or goddess were you? In what fane of chalcedony, or palace of ebony and gold, did I, a long-forgotten poet, sing before you the hymns or lyrics of my adoration?... Do you not remember me?”

“Oh, yes, I remember you,” she said, in her plaintive soprano. “But I was not a queen or a goddess: I was only a yellow lily growing in a forest glade by the banks of some forgotten stream; and you were the faun who passed by and trampled me [in pursuit of a fleeing nymph] [in the garden of Lais;

and you were the prince who passed by and trampled me on your way to her chamber door].”

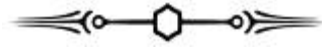
“Poor little flower!” he cried, with a compassion he did not need to feign: It was impossible to resist the dove-like mournful cadence in her voice, the submissive sorrow and affection of her gaze. She said nothing, but her head drooped nearer to his shoulder, and her lips took on a more sorrowful and seductive curve. Even if she were not half so lovely and desirable, he felt that it would be impardonably brutal not to kiss her ... Her lips were cool as flowers after an April rain, and they clung softly to his, as if in gratitude for his tenderness and pity ...

The next day, he looked for her in vain among the bathers at the beach. She had promised to be there — had promised with many lingering kisses and murmurs. Disconsolate, remembering with a pang the gentle pressure of her mouth, the light burden of her body so loath to part from his arms, he strolled towards the dune in whose shelter they had sat. He paused, hearing voices from behind it, and listened involuntarily, for one of the voices was hers. The other, low and indistinct, with a note of passion, was a man’s voice ... With the dove-like soprano

whose tones were so fresh and vibrant in his memory, he heard her say: “I was only a yellow lily growing in a forest glade by the banks of some forgotten stream; and you were the faun who passed by and trampled me.”

A Copy of Burns

First published in 1930



ANDREW MCGREGOR AND his nephew, John Malcolm, were precisely alike, except for one particular. Both were unmistakably Scottish, to an extent that was almost caricatural; both were lean-faced and close-lipped, and ropy of figure; both were thrifty to the point of penuriousness; and both loved with a dour love the rugged soil of their neighboring hillside ranches in El Dorado. The difference lay in this, that McGregor, a native of Ayrshire, was fantastically enamored of the poetry of Burns, whom he quoted on all possible occasions, regardless of whether or not the verse was appropriate. But young Malcolm, who was Californian by birth, had a secret disdain for anything in rhyme or meter, and looked upon his uncle's literary enthusiasm as an odd weakness in a nature otherwise sound and admirable. This opinion, however, he had always been careful to conceal from the old man; though his reasons for concealing it were not altogether those of respect for an elder and affection for a relative.

McGregor was not close upon eighty; and a lifetime of rigorous toil had bowed his back and consumed his vitality. In the space of a few months, his health had broken, and he was now quite feeble. It was generally thought that he would leave his well-kept orchard, as well as a tidy deposit in the Placerville bank, to John Malcolm, the son of his sister Elizabeth, rather than to his own sons, George and Joseph, who had tired of country labor years before and were now prospering after their own fashion in Sacramento. Young Malcolm, certainly, was deserving; and the ranch left

him by his parents was of poorer soil than McGregor's, and had never yielded more than a scant living, despite the industry of its owners.

One day, McGregor sent for his nephew. The young man found the eider sitting in an arm-chair before the fire-place, pitifully weak; and his fingers trembled helplessly as they turned the worn pages of the copy of Burns he was holding. His voice was a thin, rasping whisper.

"My time is about come, John," he said, "but I want to gie yea gift with my own hand before I jany. Take this copy of Burns. I recommend that ye peruse it diligent-like."

Malcolm, a little surprised, accepted the gift with proper thanks and with all due expressions of solicitude regarding his uncle's health. He took the volume home, placed it on a shelf which contained an almanac, a Bible, and two mail-order catalogues; and forgot all about it henceforward.

A week later, Andrew McGregor died. After he had been interred in the Placerville [Georgetown] cemetery, a search was made for his will. It was never found; and in due course of time, his sons laid claim to the property. Afterwards, they sold the ranch, not caring to keep it themselves.

John Malcolm swallowed his disappointment in a dour silence, and went on plowing his rocky slope of grape-vines and pear-trees. He saved a little money, purchased a little more property, and eventually found himself in a position of tolerable comfort, which however could be maintained only at the cost of incessant work. He married; and one daughter was born to him. He named her after his aunt Elizabeth, of whom he had been fond. Twenty years later, the long hours of back-breaking toil, plus an addiction to El Dorado moonshine, had finally done their work. Prematurely worn out at fifty, John Malcolm lay dying. Double pneumonia had set in; and the doctor made no pretense of hopefulness.

Malcolm's wife and daughter sat at his bedside. Usually a silent man, delirium had now loosened his tongue, and he babbled for hours at a time. Mostly, he talked of the money and property he had once hoped to inherit from Andrew McGregor; and regret for its loss was mingled with reproaches toward his uncle. The lost will had been forgotten by everyone else long ago; and no one had dreamt that he had cared so much, or borne the matter so much in mind all these years.

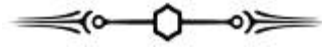
His wife and daughter were shocked by his babbling. In an effort to preoccupy her mind, the girl Elizabeth took from the shelf the copy of Burns which McGregor had once presented to his nephew, and began to turn the sheets. She read a poem here and a stanza there; and with a mechanical feverishness her fingers contrived to flick the pages. Suddenly she came upon a thin sheet of writing-paper, which had been cut to the exact size of the book and had been pasted in so unobtrusively that no one could have detected its presence without opening the volume at the right place. On this sheet, in faded ink, was written the last will and testament of Andrew McGregor, in which he had left all his property to John Malcolm.

Silently the girl showed the will to her mother. As the two bent over the yellowed sheet, the dying man ceased to babble.

"What's that?" he said, peering toward the woman. Evidently, he was now aware of his surroundings, and had become rational again. Elizabeth went over to the bed and told him how she had found the will. He made no comment whatever, but his face went ashen and lifeless, with a look of bleak despair. He did not speak again. He died within thirty minutes. It is probable that his death was hastened several hours by the shock.

Quest of the Gazolba

First published in 1947



THE CROWN OF the kings of Ustaim was fashioned from the rarest materials that could be procured anywhere. Its circlet was of gold mined from a huge meteor that fell in the isle of Cyntrom, shaking the isle with calamitous earthquake; and the gold was harder and brighter than any native gold of earth. It was set with thirteen jewels, unmatched even in fable, that starred the circlet with strange, unquiet fires and lusters dreadful as the eyes of the basilisk.

More wonderful than all else, however, was the stuffed gazolba-bird that topped the crown, gripping the circlet with its steely claws just above the wearer's brow, and towering with splendid plumage of green, violet and vermillion. Its beak was like polished brass, its eyes were like small dark garnets in silver sockets. Seven lacy blood-red quills arose from its black-dappled head; and a white tail fell down in a spreading fan like the beams of some white sun behind the circle.

The bird was the last of its kind, according to the sailors who had slain it in an almost legendary isle beyond Sotar, far to the east. For nine generations it had decked the crown of Ustaim; and the kings looked upon it as the sacred emblem of their fortunes, whose loss would be followed by grave disaster.

Euvoran, the son of Karpoom, was the crown's ninth wearer. He had worn it superbly for two years and ten months, following the death of Karpoom from a surfeit of stuffed eels and jellied salamanders' eggs. On all public occasions it had graced the brow of the young king, conferring upon

him a great majesty in the eyes of the beholders. Also, it had served to conceal the sad increase of an early baldness.

In the late autumn of the third year of his reign, Euvoran rose from a breakfast including twelve courses and twelve wines. As was his custom, he went immediately to the hall of justice, whose windows looked out across the city of Aramoam toward the orient seas.

Being well fortified by his breakfast, Euvoran felt himself prepared to unravel the most tangled skeins of law and crime, and to mete swift punishment to all malefactors. Beside his throne's right arm there stood an executioner leaning on a huge mace with a leaden head. Often with this mace, the bones of heinous offenders were broken, or their brains were spilt in the king's presence on a floor strewn with black sand. At the throne's left arm a torturer busied himself with the screws and pullies of certain fearful instruments, testing them repeatedly.

On that morning the city constables brought before Euvoran only a few petty thieves and vagrants. There were no cases of felony such as would have warranted the wielding of the mace or the use of boot and rack. The king, who had looked forward to a pleasant session, was disappointed.

"Away with these mackerel!" he roared, and his crown shook with indignation, and the tall gazolba-bird on the crown appeared to nod and bow. "They pollute my presence. Give each one a hundred strokes of the hardwood briar on the bare sole of each foot, and forget not the heels."

Before the court-officers could obey him, two belated constables entered the hall of justice, haling between them a most peculiar individual with the long-handled, many-pointed hooks used in Aramoam for the apprehending of suspected criminals. Though the hooks were seemingly embedded in his flesh as well as in his filthy rags, the prisoner bounded continually aloft like a goat, and his captors were obliged to follow him in these lively and

undignified saltations, so that the three presented the appearance of acrobats.

With one last flying leap in which the officers were drawn through the air like the tails of a kite, the queer personage came to a pause before Euvoran. The king regarded him in amazement and was not prepossessed by the extreme suppleness with which he bowed to the floor, causing his captors, who had not yet recovered their equilibrium, to sprawl at full length in the royal presence.

“Ha! what have we now?” said the king in an ominous voice.

“Sire, ’tis another vagabond,” replied the breathless officers. “He would have passed through Aramoam in the fashion that you behold, without stopping, and without even lessening the height of his saltations, if we had not arrested him.”

“Such behavior is highly suspicious,” growled Euvoran. “Prisoner, declare your name, your birth and occupation, and the infamous crimes of which beyond doubt you are guilty.”

The captive, who was cross-eyed, appeared to include Euvoran, the mace-bearer, and the torturer and his instruments all in a single glance. His nose, ears and other features possessed unnatural mobility, and he grimaced continually, making his unclean beard toss and curl like sea-weed on a whirlpool. He was ill-favored to an extravagant degree.

“I’m a necromancer,” he replied in, a tone that set Euvoran’s teeth on edge like the grating of metal upon glass. “I was born in that realm where the dawn and the sunset meet and the moon is equal in brightness to the sun.”

“Ha! a necromancer,” snorted the king. “Do you not know that necromancy is a capital crime in Ustaim? We shall find means to dissuade you from such infamous practises.”

At a sign from Euvoran the officers drew the captive toward the instruments of torture. To their surprise he allowed himself to be chained supinely on an iron rack. The torturer began to work the levers and the rack lengthened little by little with a surly grinding, till it seemed that the prisoner's joints would be torn apart. Inch by inch was added to his stature; yet he appeared to feel no discomfort. To the stupefaction of all present, it soon became plain that his arms, legs and body were more extensible than the rack itself: for the frame was now drawn to its limit.

All were silent, viewing a thing so monstrous. Euvoran rose from his throne and went over to the rack, as if doubting his own eyes. The prisoner said to him:

“You would do well to release me, O King Euvoran.”

“Say you so?” the king cried out in a rage. “We have other ways of dealing with felons in Ustaim.”

He made a sign to the executioner, who came forward quickly, raising his leaden-headed mace.

“On your own head be it,” said the necromancer, and he rose instantly from the rack, breaking the bonds that held him as if they had been chains of grass. Then, towering to a dreadful height which the wrenchings of the rack had given him, he pointed his long forefinger at the king's crown. Simultaneously he uttered a foreign word that was shrill and eldritch as the crying of fowl that pass over toward unknown shores in the night.

As if in answer to that word, there was a loud, sudden flapping of wings above Euvoran's head, and the king felt that his head was strangely lightened and bare. A shadow fell upon him, and he, and all others present, saw above them in the air the stuffed gazolba-bird, which had been killed more than two hundred years before by seafaring men in a remote island.

The wings of the bird, a living splendor, were outspread for flight, and it carried still in its claws the jeweled circlet of the crown.

Balancing, it hung for a little over the throne, while the king watched it in awe and consternation. Then, with a great whirring, its white tail outspread like the beams of a flying sun, it flew swiftly through the open palace-portals and passed eastward from Aramoam into the morning light.

After it the necromancer followed with goatish leapings, and no man tried to deter him. Those who saw him swore that he went north along the ocean strand, while the bird flew seaward, as if homing to the half-fabulous isle of its nativity. The necromancer was seen no more in Ustaim. But the crew of a merchant galley, landing later in Aramoam, told how the gazolba-bird had passed over them in mid-ocean, still flying toward the uncharted coasts of dawn. And they said that the gold crown, with its thirteen unmatched gems, was still carried by the bird.

King Euvoran, so weirdly bereft, with his baldness rudely bared to the gaze of thieves and vagrants, was as one on whom the gods have sent down a sudden bolt. It seemed to him that his royalty had flown with that crown which was the emblem of his fathers. Moreover the thing was against nature, annulling all laws: since never before, in history or fable, had a dead bird taken flight from the kingdom of Ustaim.

Indeed, the loss was a dire calamity. Donning a voluminous turban of purple silk, Euvoran held council with his ministers regarding the state dilemma that had thus arisen. The ministers were no less troubled and perplexed than Euvoran, since neither the bird nor the circlet could be replaced. In the meanwhile this irreparable misfortune was rumored throughout Ustaim. The land became filled with doubt and confusion, and some of the people murmured against Euvoran, saying that no man could be their rightful ruler without the gazolba-crown.

Then, as was the custom of the kings in any national crisis, Euvoran went to the temple in which dwelt the god Geol, the chief deity of Ustaim. Alone, with bare head and unshod feet as was ordained by priestly law, he entered the dim adytum. Here the image of Geol, pot-bellied, and made of earth-brown faience, reclined eternally on its back and seemed to watch the motes in a beam of sunlight from the slotted wall. Dropping prone in the dust that had gathered about the idol through ages, the king gave homage and implored an oracle to illuminate and guide him in his need. Presently a voice issued from the god's navel, like a subterranean rumbling:

“Go forth, and seek the gazolba in those isles that lie below the orient sun. There, on the far coasts of dawn, thou shalt again behold the living bird which is the symbol and the fortune of thy dynasty. And there, with thy own hand, thou shalt slay the bird.”

Euvoran felt greatly comforted, since the utterances of the god were thought infallible. It seemed that the oracle implied in plain terms that he should recover the lost crown of Ustaim with its avian superstructure

Returning to the palace, he sent for the captains of his proudest galleys of war which lay at anchor in the tranquil harbor, and ordered them to prepare immediately for a long voyage.

When all was made ready, King Euvoran went aboard the flagship which was a towering trireme with oars of beef-wood and stout sails dyed in saffron and scarlet. A long banner flamed at the masthead, bearing the gazolba-bird in its natural colors on a field of cobalt. The rowers and sailors were giant Negroes, and the soldiers who manned the vessel were fierce mercenaries from desert kingdoms. Going aboard, the king took with him certain of his concubines, his jesters and musicians, as well as an ample stock of rare foods and liquors, so that he should lack for nothing.

Also, mindful of the prophecy of Geol, he armed himself with a longbow and a quiver filled with hawk-feathered arrows. And he carried a sling of lion-skin and a blow-gun of black bamboo from which tiny poisoned darts were discharged.

It seemed that the gods favored the voyage. A wind blew strongly from the west, and the fleet, numbering fifteen vessels, was borne with bellying sails toward the risen sun. The farewell shoutings of Euvoran's people on the wharves were soon stilled by distance; and Aramoam's marble houses on its palmy hills were lost in a floundering bank of azure.

Trusting in the oracle of Geol, who had never failed his fathers, the king made merry as was his custom. Reclining beneath a canopy on the poop of the trireme, he swilled from an emerald beaker the wines and brandies that had lain in his palace vaults, storing the warmth of long sunken suns. He laughed at the ribaldries of his fools, and his women diverted him with harlotries older than Rome or Atlantis. But always he kept at hand, beside his couch, the weapons with which he hoped to hunt and slay again the gazolba.

Auspicious winds blew steadily, and the fleet sped onward with the great black oarsmen singing and the gorgeous sails flapping loudly. After a fortnight they came to Sotar, whose low-lying coast of cassia and sago barred the sea for a hundred miles in Loithe, the chief port, they paused to inquire for the gazolba-bird. There were rumors that the bird had passed above Sotar; and some of the people said that a cunning sorcerer named Iffibos had captured it with his spells and had shut it in a cage. Hearing this the king landed in Loithe and went with certain of his captains and soldiers to visit Iffibos, who lived in a mountain valley at the island's core.

It was a tedious journey. Euvoran was much annoyed by the huge and vicious gnats of Sotar, who failed to respect royalty and were always

insinuating themselves under his turban. When, after much delay in the deep jungles, they came to the crag-perched house of Iffibos, he found that the bird was merely one of the bright-plumaged vultures peculiar to that region, which Iffibos had tamed for his own amusement. The king returned to Loithe, declining somewhat rudely the invitation of the sorcerer, who wished to show him the unusual feats of falconry to which he had trained the vulture. In Loithe the king tarried no longer than was necessary for the laying aboard of fifty jars of that fine cocoanut arrack in which Sotar excels all other orient lands.

Then the ships of Euvoran sailed beyond Sotar and came after thirty days to the seldom-visited isle of Tosk, whose people are more akin to monkeys than to men. Euvoran asked the people for news of the gazolba and received only an apish chattering in reply. He ordered his men-at-arms to catch some of these savage islanders and crucify them on the coco-palms for their incivility. Then the men-at-arms pursued the nimble people of Tosk for a full day without catching even one of them. So the king contented himself by crucifying two of the men-at-arms for their failure to obey him.

Beyond Tosk, which was the usual limit of voyaging from Ustaim the vessels entered the Ilozian Sea and began to touch at partly mythic shores and islands charted only in story. But nowhere could the voyagers find a single feather such as had formed the gazolba's plumage; and the quaint people of those isles had never seen the bird.

However, the king saw many flocks of unknown, bright-winged fowl that went over his galleys, passing between the unmapped islets. Landing often, he practiced his archery on lorikeets and lyre-birds and boobies, or stalked the golden cockatoos with his blowgun.

The voyagers drove into mornings crossed by gilded lories, and noontides where rose flamingoes went before them to lost, inviolate strands.

The stars changed above them, and under the alien Signs they heard the melancholy cry of swans that flew southward, fleeing the winter of undiscovered realms and seeking the summer in trackless worlds.

They held speech with fabulous men who wore for mantles the tail plumes of the roc, trailing far on the earth behind them. They spoke with people whose bodies were covered with a down like that of new-hatched fowl, and others whose flesh was studded as if with pin-feathers.

At noon, early in the fourth month of the voyage, a new and unheard of shore ascended from the deep. It curved for many miles, with sheltered harbors and crags and low-lying wooded valleys. As the galleys hove toward it, Euvoran saw that stone towers rose on some of the highest crags. But in the haven below them there were no ships at anchor nor boats moving; and the shore of the haven was a wilderness of green trees and grass.

Entering the haven, the voyagers descried no sign of man, other than the crag-reared towers.

The place, however, was full of an extraordinary number and variety of birds. They ranged in size from little tits and passerines to creatures of greater wing-spread than eagle or condor. They circled over the ships in coveys and great, motley flocks, seeming to be both curious and wary. King Euvoran thought that here was a likely haunt in which to track down the gazolba. Arming himself for the chase, he went ashore with several of his men in a small boat.

The birds, even the largest, were plainly timid and inoffensive. When Euvoran landed on the beach, the very trees appeared to take flight, so numerous were the fowl that soared and flew inland or sought the rocks that rose beyond bow-shot. None remained of the multitude visible shortly before; and the king was somewhat annoyed, since he did not wish to leave

without bringing down a trophy of his skill. He thought the birds' behavior curious on account of the solitude; for there were no paths except those made by forest animals. The woods were wild, the meadows untilled; and the towers were seemingly desolate, with sea-fowl and land-fowl flying in and out of their windows.

The king and his men combed the deserted woods and came to a steep slope, covered with bushes and dwarf cedars, whose upper incline approached the tallest tower. At the slope's bottom Euvoran saw a small owl that slept in one of the cedars, as if unaware of the commotion made by the other birds in their flight. He trained an arrow and shot down the owl, though ordinarily he would have spared a prey so paltry.

He was about to pick up the fallen owl, when one of his men cried out in alarm. Turning his head as he stooped, the king beheld a brace of colossal birds, larger than any he had yet discerned, that came down from the tower like falling thunderbolts. Before he could fit another arrow to the string, they were upon him, making a loud roar with their drumming wings, and beating him instantly to the ground.

Then, before his men could rally to assist him, one of the great birds fastened its claws in the cape of the king's mantle and carried him away toward the tower on the crag as easily as a falcon carrying a young hare. The king had dropped his longbow under the birds' onset, and the blow-gun had been shaken loose from his girdle, and all his darts and arrows were spilled. No weapon remained to him, except a small needle-sharp dagger, and this he could not use to any purpose in mid-air.

Swiftly he neared the tower, with the wings of his captor flapping thunderously above him, and a flock of lesser fowl circling about him and shrieking as if in derision. A sickness came upon him because of the height to which he had been carried, and giddily he saw the tower walls sink past

him with windows wide as doorways. Then, as he began to retch in his sickness, he was borne in through one of the windows and was dropped rudely on the floor of a spacious chamber.

He sprawled at full length on his face, while the floor seemed to pitch beneath him like a vessel's deck in storm. Recovering somewhat from his vertigo, Euvoran raised himself to a sitting position. Before him, on a sort of dais between posts of black jasper, was a monstrous perch of gold and ivory. Upon it sat a most gigantic and uncommon bird, eyeing Euvoran disdainfully, as an emperor might eye some gutter-snipe that his palace guards have haled before him.

The bird's plumage was Tyrian purple, and his beak was like a pickax of pale bronze darkening greenly toward the point. He clutched the perch with talons longer than the armored fingers of a warrior. His head was adorned with amber and turquoise quills like a many-pointed crown. About his long, unfeathered neck, rough as the scaled skin of a dragon, he wore a singular necklace composed of human heads and the heads of various feral beasts, such as the weasel, the stoat, the wildcat and the fox, all of which had been reduced to a common size and were no bigger than ground nuts.

Euvoran was terrified by the aspect of this fowl. His alarm was not lessened when he saw that many other great birds were sitting about the chamber on lower and less costly perches, like peers of the realm in their sovereign's presence.

Now to his confoundment the huge Tyrian-feathered bird addressed him in human speech, with a harsh but majestic voice:

“Too boldly thou hast intruded on the peace of Ornava, isle that is sacred to the birds; and wantonly thou hast slain one of my subjects. For I am the monarch of all birds that fly, walk, wade or swim, and I hold my capital in Ornava. Justice shall be done upon thee for thy crime. But if thou hast aught

to say in thy defense, I will give thee hearing now. I do not wish that even the vilest vermin should accuse me of inequity.

Blustering, though afraid at heart, Euvoran gave answer:

“I came hither seeking the gazolba, which adorned my crown in Ustaim, and was feloniously reft from me with the crown through the spell of a lawless necromancer. I am Euvoran, King of Ustaim, and I bow down to no bird, not even the mightiest of that species.”

The ruler of the birds, seeming amazed and indignant, questioned Euvoran sharply concerning the gazolba. Learning that this bird had been killed by sailors and afterwards stuffed, and that the sole purpose of Euvoran in his voyage was to catch and kill it a second time and re-stuff it if necessary, the ruler cried angrily:

“This helpeth not thy case but showeth thee guilty of a two-fold crime and a thing wholly against nature. In my tower, as is right and proper, I keep the bodies of men that my taxidermists have stuffed for me; but it is not allowable that men should do thus to birds. In retribution I shall commit thee presently to my taxidermists. Truly, a stuffed king will enhance my collection.”

Snapping his great beak, the bird-monarch turned to Euvoran’s guards:

“Away with this vermin. Shut it in the man-cage and keep a strict watch.”

Euvoran, urged by the pecking of his guards, was compelled to climb a sloping ladder with rungs of teak that led to a room above in the tower’s top. In the center of this room stood a bamboo cage capacious enough for six men. The birds drove Euvoran into the cage and bolted its door upon him with their claws. One of them remained beside the cage, eyeing him vigilantly through the bars; and the other flew out through a window and did not return.

The king sat down on a litter of straw, which was all that the cage provided for his comfort. Despair lay heavy upon him, and it seemed that his plight was both dreadful and ignominious. The things that had happened to him were monstrous beyond imagining. It was monstrous that a bird should speak with human speech, should dwell in royal state with servitors to do his will and the pomp and power of a king.

And monstrous above all was the doom that the bird-monarch had decreed for Euvoran.

After a while, as he pondered dismally, water and raw grain were set before him in earthen vessels by fowls that came and departed in silence. Still later, as the day drew toward sunset, he heard men shouting and birds shrieking below the tower; and together with these noises came clashings as of weapons and thuddings as of boulders loosened from the crag. Euvoran knew that his men were assailing the place in an effort to rescue him. The noises mounted, and there were cries of people wounded and a shrilling of harpies in battle. But presently the clamor ebbed away, the shoutings grew faint, and Euvoran knew that his men had failed to take the tower.

Hopeless, he sat with bowed head while the sun went down, gilding the bars of his cage through a western window. Soon after sunset a night guard came in to relieve the day-flying fowl who watched the captive king. The newcomer was a nyctalops with glowing yellow eyes. He stood taller than Euvoran, and was formed and feathered like a great burly owl. Euvoran was uncomfortably aware of the bird's eyes, burning upon him more vigilantly and balefully as the dusk deepened.

The moon rose, a little past the full, and poured its spectral quicksilver into the room. It paled the eyes of the bird, so that they seemed less watchful and formidable. Euvoran took heart and conceived a desperate scheme.

His avian captors, thinking all his weapons lost, had neglected to remove from his girdle the small needle-tipped dagger. He gripped the hilt stealthily under his mantle and pretended a sudden illness, groaning and tossing and throwing himself convulsively against the bars. The nyctalops came nearer, curious to learn what ailed the king; and stooping, he leaned his owlsh head between the bars above Euvoran. And the king, feigning a more violent convulsion, drew his dagger from its sheath and struck quickly at the outstretched throat of the bird.

The thrust went home, piercing the deepest vein. The bird's squawking was choked by his own blood; and he fell, flapping noisily, so, that Euvoran feared that the tower's occupants would be wakened by the sound. But it seemed that his fears were groundless, for nothing stirred in the chambers below; and soon the flappings ceased and the nyctalops lay still in a great heap of ruffled feathers.

The king shot back the bolts of the latticed bamboo door with little difficulty. Going to the head of the teakwood ladder, he peered down into the room beneath, and saw that the bird-king slept in the moonlight on his gold and ivory perch, with his terrible pickaxe beak under his wing. Euvoran feared to descend, lest the ruler should awake and see him. Also, it occurred to him that the tower's lower stories might well be guarded by such fowl as the nocturnal creature he had killed.

His despair returned, but being of a crafty bent, Euvoran conceived another scheme. With much labor, using the dagger, he skinned the slain nyctalops and cleaned the blood from its plumage as best he could. Then he wrapped himself in the skin with the head of the night-bird rearing above his own head, and eyeholes in its burly throat through which he could look out amid the feathers. The skin fitted him well enough because of his

pigeon-breast and pot-belly; and his spindle shanks were hidden behind the bird's thick-feathered legs as he walked.

He descended the ladder, treading cautiously and making little noise, lest the ruler of the birds should awaken and detect his imposture. The ruler was all alone, and he slept without stirring while Euvoran reached the floor and crossed the chamber stealthily to another ladder, leading to the next room below.

In this room there were many huge birds asleep on perches, and the king could hardly breathe for terror as he passed among them. Some of the birds moved a little and chirped drowsily, as if aware of his presence; but none challenged him.

He went down to a third room, and was startled to find within it the standing figures of many men, some in the garb of sailors, and others clothed like merchants, and others nude and painted with bright ores like savages. A deathly stillness was upon them all. Remembering that which the bird ruler had told him, Euvoran divined that they were persons who had been captured like himself and had been slain by the birds and preserved through avian taxidermy. Trembling, he passed down to another room, which was full of stuffed cats and tigers and serpents and various other enemies of bird-kind.

The room below this was the tower's ground story, and its windows and portals were guarded by several gigantic night-fowl similar to the one whose skin Euvoran wore. They eyed him alertly with their fiery golden orbs and greeted him with the soft whoo-whooping of owls. Euvoran's knees knocked together behind the bird-shanks; but imitating the sound in reply, he passed unmolested among the guards.

Reaching an open portal, he saw the moonlit rock of the crag below him. Still mindful of the birds that watched him, he hopped down from the door-

sill like a fowl and found his way precariously from ledge to ledge, till he reached the slope at whose bottom he had killed the little owl. Here the descent became easier, and he soon came to the woods around the harbor.

Before he could enter the woods, there was a shrill singing of arrows around him, and the king was wounded slightly by one of the arrows. He roared out in anger and dropped the mantling bird-skin. The arrows ceased, and Euvoran was greeted by a great shouting from his own men, who were returning to assail the tower by night. Learning this, he soon forgave the jeopardy in which they had placed him.

Boarding his flagship, he ordered his captains to set sail immediately. Knowing the baleful power of the bird-monarch, he was apprehensive of pursuit; and he thought it well to place a wide interval of sea between Ornava and his vessels before dawn, when his escape would be discovered. The galleys drew from the tranquil harbor, and rounding a southern promontory, they went due east below the moon.

Euvoran, sitting in his cabin, ate abundantly to make up for his fasting in the man-cage. And he drank a whole gallon of palm-wine and a jarful of the potent pale-gold arrack of Sotar.

Halfway between midnight and morning, when the isle of Ornava had fallen far behind, the steersmen saw a wall of ebon cloud that rushed swiftly upward across the westering moon. Higher it climbed, spreading and toppling, till the storm overtook Euvoran's fleet and drove it on through weltering, unstarred chaos. The ships were borne far apart in the gloom; and at daybreak the king's trireme was alone in a headlong tumult of waves and clouds. The mast was shattered, the oars were lost or broken; and the vessel was a toy for the tempest.

For three days and nights, without glimmer of sun or star through the boiling murk, the vessel was hurled onward as if caught in a cataract

pouring relentlessly toward the world's verge. Early on the fourth day the clouds began to break a little; but the wind still blew like a hurricane from hell.

Then, looming darkly through spray and vapor, a strange land arose with beetling rocks and precipices. Though the broken oars had now been replaced, the helmsman and rowers were powerless to turn the doomed ship from its course. With a mighty crashing of its carven beak, and a terrible rending of timbers, it struck on a low, foam-hidden reef. Its lower decks were flooded quickly, and the vessel began to founder, with the poop tilting sharply and more sharply, and water frothing at the lee bulwarks.

Euvoran lashed himself with ropes to an empty wine-barrel and cast himself from the sloping deck. Those of his men who were not already drowned in the hold or swept overboard, leaped after him into that raging sea. Many clung to broken spars or casks or planks. But some were drawn under in the seething maelstroms, and others were beaten to death on the jagged rocks. And of all the ship's company, the king alone was cast ashore with life unquenched within him.

Half-drowned and senseless, Euvoran lay where the surf had spewed him on a shelving beach. Soon the gale forgot its violence and the billows came in with falling crests. The clouds went over in pearly fleeces; and the sun, climbing above the rocks, shone down upon Euvoran. He, still dazed from the sea's buffeting, heard dimly and as if in dream the shrilling of some unknown bird. Opening his eyes, he saw between himself and the sun, poising on spread wings, that varicolored glory of plumes and feathers which he knew as the gazolba. Crying again with a voice harsh and shrill as that of the peacock, the bird hung above him for a moment and then flew inland through a rift amid the crags.

Forgetful of all his hardships and the loss of his proud galleys, the king unbound himself in haste from the barrel; and rising giddily, he followed the bird. It seemed to him that the fulfilment of the oracle of Geol was now at hand. And hopefully he armed himself with a cudgel of driftwood and gathered heavy pebbles from the beach as he pursued the gazolba.

Beyond the cleft in the crags, he found a sequestered valley with quiet-flowing springs, and exotic trees, and fragrant shrubs in blossom. Here, from bough to bough before his astounded eyes, there darted great numbers fowl that wore the gaudy plumage of the gazolba. Among them, he could not distinguish the one he had followed, supposing it the avian superstructure of his lost crown. The multitude of these birds was beyond his comprehension: since he and all his people had thought the stuffed bird unique throughout the world. And it came to him that his fathers had been deceived by the sailors who had slain the bird in a remote isle, swearing later that it was the last of all its kind.

Wrath and confusion filled him. But Euvoran knew that a single bird from the flock would still stand as the emblem of his royalty in Ustaim and would justify his quest among the far orient isles. With a valiant hurling of sticks and stones, he tried to bring down one of the gazolbas. But always, as he chased them, the birds flew before him from tree to tree with a horrid shrieking and a flurry of splendid plumes. And at length, by his own good aim or a chance cast, the king brought down a gazolba.

As he went to retrieve the fallen bird, he saw a man in tattered, uncouth garments, armed with a rude bow, and carrying over his shoulder a brace of gazolbas tied together at the feet with wiry grass. The man wore for headgear the skin and feathers of the same fowl. He came toward Euvoran, shouting indistinctly through his tangled beard. The king, surprised and furious, cried loudly:

“Vile serf, how darest thou to kill the bird that is sacred to the kings of Ustaim? And knowest thou not that only the kings may wear the bird for headgear? I, who am King Euvoran, shall hold thee to accounting for these deeds.”

Eyeing Euvoran, the man laughed long and derisively as if he found much to amuse him in the king’s aspect. Indeed, Euvoran presented a spectacle far from kingly: for his garments were much bedraggled and were stiff and stained with drying seawater; and his turban had been snatched away by the waves, baring his baldness. When the man had done laughing, he said:

“Truly, this is the first and only jest that I have heard in nine years, and my laughter must be forgiven. Nine years ago I was shipwrecked on this isle. I am Naz Obbamar, a sea captain from the far southwestern land called Ullotroi, and the sole member of my ship’s company that survived and came safe to shore. In all those years I have held speech with no man, since the isle is remote from the maritime routes and has no people except the birds.

“As for your questions, they are readily answered. I kill these fowl to avert the pangs of hunger, since there is little else on the isle for sustenance apart from roots and berries. And I wear on my head the skin and feathers of the fowl because the sea stole my tarboosh when it flung me upon this strand. I know nothing of the strange laws that you mention; and moreover your kingship is a matter that concerns me little, since the isle is kingless. You and I are alone, and I am the stronger of the two and the better armed. Therefore be well advised, O King Euvoran. Since you have slain yourself a bird, I counsel you to pick up the bird and come with me. Truly, it may be that I can help you in the matter of spitting and broiling this fowl.”

The wrath of Euvoran sank within him like a flame that fails for want of oil. Clearly he saw the plight to which his voyage had brought him in the end; and bitterly he discerned the irony that was hidden in Geol's oracle. He knew that the wreckage of his fleet was scattered among lost islands or blown into seas unvoyageable. And it came to him that never again should he see the marble houses of Aramoam, nor administer the dooms of law in the justice hall, nor wear the gazolba-crown amid the plaudits of his people. Being not wholly bereft of reason, he bowed to his destiny, saying:

“Naz Obbamar, there is sense in what you have said. Therefore lead on.”

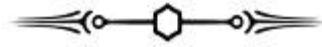
Laden with the spoils of the chase, Euvoran and Naz Obbamar followed a trail into the isle's interior. Here, in a rocky hill, Naz Obbamar had chosen a roomy cave for his abode. The captain made a fire of dry cedar boughs and showed the king how to pluck his fowl and broil it over the fire, turning it slowly on a spit of green camphor-wood.

Euvoran, who was famished, found the meat of the gazolba far from unpalatable, though somewhat lean and strongly flavored. After they had eaten, Naz Obbamar brought out from the cave a rough jar of the island clay containing wine he had made from certain berries. He and Euvoran drank from the jar by turns and told each other the tale of their adventures and forgot a while their desolate fate.

After that they shared the isle of gazolbas, hunting and eating the birds as their hunger decreed. Sometimes, for a great delicacy, they killed some other fowl that was more rarely met on the isle, though common enough, perhaps, in Ustaim or Ullotroi. And King Euvoran made himself a headdress from the skin and plumes of the gazolbas, even as Naz Obbamar had done.

Monsters in the Night

First published in 1954



THE CHANGE OCCURRED before he could divest himself of more than his coat and scarf. He had only to step out of the shoes, to shed the socks with two backward kicks, and shuffle off the trousers from his lean hind-legs and belly. But he was still deep-chested after the change, and his shirt was harder to loosen. His hackles rose with rage as he slewed his head around and tore it away with hasty fangs in a flurry of falling buttons and rags. Tossing off the last irksome ribbons, he regretted his haste. Always heretofore he had been careful in regard to small details. The shirt was monogrammed. He must remember to collect all the tatters later. He could stuff them in his pockets, and wear the coat buttoned closely on his way home, when he had changed back.

Hunger snarled within him, mounting from belly to throat, from throat to mouth. It seemed that he had not eaten for a month — for a month of months. Raw butcher's meat was never fresh enough: it had known the coldness of death and refrigeration, and had lost all vital essence. Long ago there had been other meals, warm, and sauced with still-spurting blood. But now the thin memory merely served to exasperate his ravening.

Chaos raced within his brain. Inconsequently, for an instant, he recalled the first warning of his malady, preceding even the distaste for cooked meat: the aversion, the allergy, to silver forks and spoons. It had soon extended to other objects of the same metal. He had cringed even from the touch of coinage, had been forced to use paper and refuse change. Steel,

too, was a substance unfriendly to beings like him; and the time came when he could abide it little more than silver.

What made him think of such matters now, setting his teeth on edge with repugnance, choking him with something worse than nausea?

The hunger returned, demanding swift appeasement. With clumsy pads he pushed his discarded raiment under the shrubbery, hiding it from the heavy-jowled moon. It was the moon that drew the tides of madness in his blood, and compelled the metamorphosis. But it must not betray to any chance passer the garments he would need later, when he returned to human semblance after the night's hunting.

The night was warm and windless, and the woodland seemed to hold its breath. There were, he knew, other monsters abroad in that year of the Twenty-first Century. The vampire still survived, subtler and deadlier, protected by man's incredulity. And he himself was not the only lycanthrope: his brothers and sisters ranged unchallenged, preferring the darker urban jungles, while he, being country-bred, still kept the ancient ways. Moreover, there were monsters unknown as yet to myth and superstition. But these too were mostly haunters of cities. He had no wish to meet any of them. And of such meeting, surely, there was small likelihood.

He followed a crooked lane, reconnoitered previously. It was too narrow for cars and it soon became a mere path. At the path's forking he ensconced himself in the shadow of a broad, mistletoe-blotted oak. The path was used by certain late pedestrians who lived even farther out from town. One of them might come along at any moment.

Whimpering a little, with the hunger of a starved hound, he waited. He was a monster that nature had made, ready to obey nature's first commandment: *Thou shalt kill and eat*. He was a thing of terror ... a fable whispered around prehistoric cavern-fires ... a miscegenation allied by later

myth to the powers of hell and sorcery. But in no sense was he akin to those monsters beyond nature, the spawn of a newer and blacker magic, who killed without hunger and without malevolence.

He had only minutes to wait, before his tensing ears caught the far-off vibration of footsteps. The steps came rapidly nearer, seeming to tell him much as they came. They were firm and resilient, tireless and rhythmic, telling of youth or of full maturity untouched by age. They told, surely, of a worthwhile prey; of prime lean meat and vital, abundant blood.

There was a slight froth on the lips of the one who waited. He had ceased to whimper. He crouched closer to the ground for the anticipated leap.

The path ahead was heavily shadowed. Dimly, moving fast, the walker appeared in the shadows. He seemed to be all that the watcher had surmised from the sound of his footsteps. He was tall and well-shouldered, swinging with a lithe sureness, a precision of powerful tendon and muscle. His head was a faceless blur in the gloom. He was hatless, clad in dark coat and trousers such as anyone might wear. His steps rang with the assurance of one who has nothing to fear, and has never dreamt of the couching creatures of darkness.

Now he was almost abreast of the watcher's covert. The watcher could wait no longer but sprang from his ambush of shadow, towering high upon the stranger as his hind-paws left the ground. His rush was irresistible, as always. The stranger toppled backward, sprawling and helpless, as others had done, and the assailant bent to the bare throat that gleamed more enticingly than that of a siren.

It was a strategy that had never failed ... until now ...

The shock, the consternation, had hurled him away from that prostrate figure and had forced him back upon teetering haunches. It was the shock, perhaps, that caused him to change again, swiftly, resuming human shape

before his hour. As the change began, he spat out several broken lupine fangs; and then he was spitting human teeth.

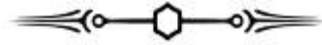
The stranger rose to his feet, seemingly unshaken and undismayed. He came forward in a rift of revealing moonlight, stooping to a half-crouch, and flexing his beryllium-steel fingers enamelled with flesh-pink.

“Who — what — are you?” quavered the werewolf.

The stranger did not bother to answer as he advanced, every synapse of the computing brain transmitting the conditioned message, translated into simplest binary terms, “Dangerous. Not human. *Kill!*”

The House of Haon-Dor (A Fragment)

First published in 1984



ROGER FARWAY HAD not declined his uncle's hospitality through mere independence, nor a desire to avoid imposing himself too onerously on a busy fiction-writer. The refusal was due rather to poetic temperament, to an unsatisfied craving for communion with the Muse of lonely places. Also, Roger had visited once before, though briefly, the old and picturesque hydraulic diggings known as Gold Canyon, and, deeply captivated, had resolved to return there at some future time. When a slight tubercular infection made it imperative that he should leave the dust and fog of San Francisco and dwell for awhile in the lucid sunshine of the higher foothills, his thoughts were drawn immediately, as if by some scenic magnetism, to Gold Canyon. Before receiving from his uncle, George Beltane, a letter offering him a sleeping-porch at Peargate, where the air and elevation were quite suitable for the treatment of his malady, he had already determined to spend the summer in the neighborhood of those long deserted diggings, twenty miles above his uncle's ranch on the highway to the Sierras.

George Beltane was well able to interpret this desire for solitude and seclusion in its proper terms. There had always been the tie of a common love for literature and beauty between himself and the youth. Roger was a poet of no small promise; and Beltane too had been a poet, till financial urgencies had compelled him to serve the more venal and pedestrian goddess of prose.

He would have welcomed his nephew on the pear and apple ranch, where he lived with little company other than that of a Japanese cook and a Portuguese foreman, and where, surely, the isolation would have been more than ample for most youths. But, without remonstrance or comment, he accepted Roger's decision, and helped him to establish himself in a pine grove on the rim of the diggings, a mile or more from the nearest auto-camp. Here a tent was reared, and was abundantly supplied with food and books. Beltane told Roger to avoid over exercise, cautioned him against the arsenic tainted springs of the lower diggings, warned him that the season was unusually good for rattlesnakes, and then drove away, resolving to keep a paternal but unobtrusive eye on the boy, and to visit him at regular intervals.

The regime to which Roger now devoted himself would no doubt have been frowned upon by the doctors. Living alone and unattended, he cooked his own meals, spent much of his time in roaming about the hills and canyon sides; and even, for recreation, attempted a little placer-mining with a gold pan in the unexhausted gullies of the hydraulic excavations. All this the doctors would have deemed too strenuous; for they had urged him to take the usual course of treatment at some foothill sanitarium.

The life, however, suited Roger well, and he gained palpably in strength, weight, and spirits. Clearly he had diagnosed his own need; for, apart from his incipient lesion, he had begun to suffer from that long, stow attrition which the sensitive experience in crowded places. Country born, he had lived too much in towns; and the fatigue thus induced was curable only by a term of almost complete solitude. Free from the oppression of human faces, he turned with unutterable relief to the quiet rocks and trees. The diggings were a source of continual fascination to him, though the romance of early gold mining, so potent in others, was but a small part of this allurements.

Here, in these broad-spaced abysses that had hollowed the ancient hill, with cliffs of reddish yellow conglomerate, and sharp-carven pyramids and dolomitic pillars rising out of the depths, the inner secrets of the earth had been laid bare; and yet, after a short period, Earth was already beginning to triumph over the ravages of man. In time, the violent erosion would be indistinguishable from that of slow, cyclic winds and waters. Yellow pines had rooted themselves on the raw declivities, had crowded close to the edge of sheer precipices, had perched on the soil-topped dolomites. Silt had gathered far down in the diggings, and young willows and alders flourished there, Grasses had taken a tentative foothold in the seams of bedrock and the piles of rotting rubble.

Roger, who had a taste for amateur geology, was never tired of hunting for petrified wood and fossil bones. Whole trunks of primeval trees, some blackened by prehistoric fire, had been exposed by the excavations. Daily he searched the ribby slopes and the vast heaps of loose rocks and gravel, never failing to find some new treasure or curiosity.

He met few people, for the region was sparsely settled, and the occupants of summer cottages and camps along the highway seldom visited the diggings. Somewhere in the locality, he had been told, were the headquarters of a small and obscure order of mystics, called the Brotherhood of the Sun, who secluded themselves in esoteric contemplation, and were rarely seen by the people of the neighboring hamlets. They were supposedly akin to the Rosicrucians; but their interpretation of the hidden realms and occult laws of nature was said to be somewhat heterodox. Roger, vaguely curious, and feeling a dim poetic sentiment of sympathy for all delvers into the occult, resolved with equal vagueness that he would visit them before the end of his sojourn at Gold

Canyon. But, at the time, he did not even trouble to inquire the exact location of their establishment.

His tent was on the south rim of the diggings. Looking across that man made gulf, he often noticed the walls and roof of a weathered shanty that leaned perilously from the high cliffs on the northern side, at a distance of more than half a mile. The shanty was closely surrounded by low-growing manzanita, and its dilapidation was plainly apparent even without the field-glasses that Roger often used on studying the local topology. Feeling but little interest at first, he decided that it was an old and long-abandoned miner's cabin, dating perhaps from the time when Gold Canyon had roared with human activity.

More than once, in his wanderings, he approached the foot of the precipice on which the shanty stood, and stared up with idle speculation at its one dark and paneless window. Also, he passed the place from behind in a circumambulation about the indented rim of the gulf. He was impressed anew by its age and desertion. Though the shake roof was still intact, and few of the boards had actually fallen or rotted away, he felt always that a breath would bring down the tottering structure in ruin. On one occasion, passing by at twilight, when a lurid sunset was deepening from sulphur into blood behind the black pines, there came to Roger the tenuous thought of something hidden and sinister that peered forth from the cabin's vacancy. This impression he dismissed quickly, as being due to some evanescent quality of the light and shade, or some nameless adumbration of his own mind and nerves. It did not return; and soon he forgot the fugitive sense of eeriness.

It was not until the second week of his stay at Gold Canyon, that Roger began to suspect anything mysterious or untoward about the shanty.

The June twilight, warm and windless, had tarried long. He had been watching a broad and sanguine-yellow crescent that was still clear of the spire-tall pines to westward of his camp. Then, turning through some idle impulse, he peered across the darkling excavation and beheld to his amazement a red light in the window of the shack, whose outlines were now almost indistinguishable. Whether it was made by lamp, lantern or fire, he could not determine. It burned steady and unflickering, and troubled his eyes strangely, as if he were gazing into the molten heart of an open furnace. A tramp or prospector, he thought, had taken temporary possession of the shanty; but this obvious explanation failed to lull entirely the first eerie sense of some inexplicable and disturbing wonder.

Chiding himself for a curiosity that he considered to be vulgar and childish, Roger sat before his tent and regarded that eye of ruddy flame on the opposite cliff. Nameless conjectures and musings flitted darkly through his mind. The moon's bloodying horn was dragged down by sable boughs, and the diggings became an unfathomable gulf of Tartarean blackness. Then, with the sinking of the moon, the mysterious light went out and was not relumed.

Early on the following day, Roger passed a little to rearward of the cabin in the course of a long and leisurely stroll, but perceived no sign of occupancy. There was no faintest thread of smoke from the rust-eaten and crazily oblique stove-pipe. Making a semicircle through the low and pathless brush from rim to rim of the unclimbable cliff on each hand, he found no...

Here the manuscript ends

A Good Embalmer



I

JONAS TURPLE AND CALEB UDLEY, joint owners of the sole undertaking establishment in Ramsville [Johnsville], were continuing an immemorial dispute.

“You couldn’t embalm a salted herring,” said Turple, with the air of jocose and rubicund contempt which he usually adopted in referring to his partner’s technical abilities and methods. “Look at the job you did on old Aaron Webley, five years ago, when I was away at the embalmers’ convention [on my honeymoon]. Of course no one would have been the wiser if the family hadn’t decided to transfer him to their home lot in Georgetown, ten months after [Johnstown]. The condition of the corpse wasn’t much of an advertisement for us. I believe in doing a thorough job, one that will endure and stand up under all vicissitudes. And I tell you, there’s nothing like corrosive sublimate, and plenty of it. You can have your Peruvian bark, your camphor and cinnamon and other aromatics, and your sulphate of zinc; but all this stuff is mere trimming if you ask me.”

Turple, a large, florid, middle-aged bachelor, who looked more like a restaurant owner than a mortician, terminated his remarks with a resonant sniff and eyed his confrere with semi-jovial belligerence.

“Sulphate of zinc is good enough for me,” maintained Caleb Udley, with much acerbity. He was a thin, meager, deacon-like person, alternately bullied by his wife and his business partner. He was, however, more recalcitrant toward the latter than toward the former, and rarely made an attempt to uphold his own views.

“Well, you’ll never shoot any of it into me,” said Turple. “You’d make a mess of it anyway. I’d certainly hate to be at your mercy and have you try to embalm me, if I were dead.”

“Even at that, there are times when I wouldn’t mind having the chance,” returned Udley, with a tart malice.

“The hell you say. Look here, Caleb, if I should die before you do, and you start your blundering operations on me, I’ll simple rise up from the dead.”

“But the dead don’t rise,” said Udley, who was not only something of a Sadducean, but was also rather literal-minded.

II

It is not the function of this story to record in detail, or even in rough outline, the lives of two country undertakers.

For many years after the discussion related above, Turple and Udley pursued the somewhat funereal tenor of their ways. In the face of their perennial disputation, half-humorous, half-contemptuous on one side and wholly acrimonious on the other, it would have been difficult to determine the exact degree of brotherly love which existed between them. Turple continued to deride his confrere’s professional capacities and opinions; and Udley never failed to resent the derision. With slight variations, their quotidian quarrel was repeated a thousand times.

The situation was modified only by the admission of a third and younger partner, one Thomas Agdale, into the firm. Agdale, who was comparatively inexperienced, and was also mild-tempered, became the butt of both his seniors; and, in especial, of Udley, who thus succeeded in transferring to another victim some of the scorn and contumely which he himself endured at the hands of Turple.

Even undertakers, however, are not exempt from the common laws of mortality. Turple, who had long shown an apoplectic tendency, but nevertheless had not expected a so sudden and early demise, was found dead one morning in the local hotel-room which he had occupied for more than twenty years. His partners, as was natural, were deeply shocked and surprised by the news; but, since he had omitted to leave any instructions to the contrary, they proceeded to take charge of his body with all due expedition.

The feelings of Udley, when Turple's corpse was laid out before him on the embalming-table, were somewhat peculiar and difficult to analyze. How much of real regret or sorrow they included, I am not prepared to say: but, undeniably, there was a more or less furtive undercurrent of actual triumphancy, of self-vindication if not of vindictiveness. After all of Turple's manifold and life-long aspersions on his capabilities as an embalmer, Udley was now in a position to render the last services to his vilifier. It would not be proper to say that he rejoiced in this situation; but certainly his emotions were those of a wronged man who beholds the final balancing of the scales of justice.

Agdale was present, but Udley had resolved that he himself would perform everything necessary and would utilize the services of Agdale only in the mere lifting of the corpse into the grimly sumptuous casket that had been prepared for it.

The March afternoon was murky and foggy; and the lights had been turned on in the rear room of the undertaking parlor, where Udley and Agdale were about to begin their gruesome task. They gave a semi-nocturnal touch to the macabre scene.

"So I couldn't embalm a salted codfish, hey?" thought Udley to himself, remembering his partner's habitual jest with the sour resentment of one who

is wholly without humor. "Well, we'll see about that."

He approached the puffy and somewhat abominous corpse, and was about to begin the preliminary incisions. These, however, were not made — at least not by Caleb Udley. For, even as he stooped above it, the cadaver stirred, its eyelids fluttered and opened, and that which had been the earthly shell of Jonas Turple sat up suddenly and heavily on the cold slab.

Udley leapt back. His lean frame exuded from head to foot an icy, instantaneous perspiration, and terror had deprived him of the power of thought and reason. Something seemed to have gone wrong with his heart, also; and he felt an awful choking sensation between the intolerably suspended beat. Agdale, who had a superstitious vein, had given one look at the animated corpse and was fleeing from the shop by the back door.

"*What did I tell you, Caleb?*" Udley was aware that the cadaver had spoken. Its voice seemed to issue from a deep vault, and was hideously muffled, as if it had made its way through some intervening medium of a viscous or semi-liquescient nature. It was not the familiar voice of the living Turple: but one could readily have imagined it as issuing from the lips of Lazarus after his resurrection.

If any further remarks or observations were made by the corpse, they were not heard by Udley. His heart, at the sound of that unnatural voice, had refused to continue its disordered throbbing, and he had fallen dead on the floor.

III

It was two hours later when Agdale mastered his terrors sufficiently to admit of returning. In the meanwhile, he had confided to several of the townspeople, including the doctor who had signed Turple's death-certificate, the unbelievable circumstances which had occasioned his hasty

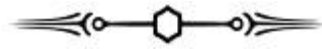
departure. It was a resolute and valiant committee of investigation which finally entered the undertakers' parlors.

The situation which revealed itself here was more mysterious and more remarkable than even the superstitious Agdale had expected. The corpse of Turple was lying decorously in the very same place and position in which it had been laid out by Udley and Agdale; and there was not the faintest hint of life or supernatural re-animation. Dr. Martin needed no more than a glance to re-confirm his original opinion, that the deceased was properly and lawfully dead.

For a few moments, no one noticed Udley. He had been alive when Agdale fled; and the latter not unnaturally surmised that Udley had followed suit. Somehow, no one had given him much thought.

It was Agdale who made the singular discovery that the new casket which had been provided for Turple's reception was now occupied — and that the occupant was Caleb Udley! But it remained for Dr. Martin, in his official capacity as coroner, to make a discovery that was even more singular, if possible. *The corpse of Udley had been fully and efficiently embalmed; and the chief agent employed was corrosive sublimate.* The body of Turple, however, was still in need of this service.

Double Cosmos



IT IS FOR THE READER to decide how much importance can be attached to the manuscript left by Bernard Meecham. Doubtless few will consider it anything more than a record of delirium induced by the strange drug that Meecham had compounded. Even from this standpoint the record possesses a certain medical interest: for it throws a startling light on the possibilities of human sensation. And if one accepts Meecham's experiences at his own valuation, it will be seen that the veil of a new and heretofore unsuspected world has been lifted.

Meecham, a brilliant young chemist, had made from the beginning a special study of narcotic drugs. He had been freed by an ample inheritance from the necessity of commercializing his knowledge and his talents, and was thus able to give his whole time to the specialty which absorbed him so deeply. A recluse, he was incommunicative regarding the aim of his researches; and the revolutionary theory he had conceived was not known to his colleagues. This theory, as well as the outcome of his experiments, he confided only to the manuscript written and dated shortly before his unexplained disappearance. The manuscript was found lying on his laboratory desk. It is now published in accord with a brief, unaddressed note of instructions also left behind by Meecham.

THE MANUSCRIPT

Even in my childhood, I began to suspect that the world about us was perhaps only the curtain of hidden things. The suspicion was born following my recovery from an attack of scarlet fever attended by intervals of

delirium. In that delirium, recalled dimly afterwards, I had seemed to live in a monstrous world peopled by strange misshapen beings whose actions were fraught with terror and menace; or, when not menacing, were wholly cryptic and unearthly. This realm of shadow had seemed no less real than the world perceived by my normal senses; and during my convalescence I believed that it still existed somewhere beyond the corners of the familiar room; and I feared that its horrible specters might reappear at any moment.

My nightly dreams, which were often very strange and vivid, also served to confirm my intuition of other spheres and secret aspects of the known world. Each night it seemed to me that I stepped across the border of an actual land lying conterminous with the lands of day, but accessible only in sleep.

Such beliefs, whether pure fantasy, or fantasy mingled with an obscure truth, are no doubt more or less common to imaginative children.

However, as my faculties matured, I did not wholly dismiss them but was led into speculations concerning the enigmas of human perception and the workings of the sense-mechanism. It soon occurred to me that the five classified senses were very poor and doubtful channels for the cognition of reality; in fact, that their testimony regarding the nature of our surroundings might well be partially or wholly erroneous. The fact that all so-called sane and normal people, possessed of sight, hearing and the other senses, agreed substantially in their impressions of outward phenomena, might prove only the existence of common flaws or limitations in the sensory apparatus of the species. The thing called reality, perhaps, was merely a communal hallucination; and certainly, as science itself had tended to prove, man could lay claim to no finality of perception. The imagery discerned by the human eye was not that beheld by the multi-faceted eye of an insect; the colors that man saw were not perceived by the bird. Where, then, was actuality?

Inevitably, following this line of thought, I became interested in the effect of drugs, especially those narcotics which modify sensation so profoundly and in such varied and fantastic ways. I read with absorption such books as De Quincey's *Opium Eater*, *The Artificial Paradises* of Charles Baudelaire, and the almost forgotten *Hashish-Eater* of Fitzhugh Ludlow. This literary interest soon led me to study the chemistry of narcotics as well as their physiological action. Herein, I felt, were profound mysteries and a clue to secrets which none had yet unraveled.

Thus began the ten years of research and experiment which have left me a nerve-shaken wreck at twenty-nine. The earlier stages I must summarize briefly, for little enough time remains in which to record that inconceivably awesome discovery on which I stumbled in the end.

My laboratory was equipped with the finest and subtlest apparatus, and I procured for analysis all narcotic drugs familiar to modern chemistry, together with certain others found by explorers in remote savage regions. Opium and all its derivatives, the extract of hashish and the dried plant itself — mescal, atropine, peyote, kava — these and numerous others were the subjects of my experimentation. From the very first I had conceived an inkling of a strange and seemingly unauthorized theory; and to prove the theory it was necessary to study the effect of drugs on my own sensory system. Also, I was compelled to invent an incredibly delicate photo-electric device, a graph for the tracing and registration of obscure neural impulses.

My theory was, that the visions, the so-called hallucinations induced by drugs, were not due to a mere derangement of the sensory nerves, but sprang from the excitation of some new and undeveloped sense. This sense, though more complex and esoteric than the others, was akin to sight; and I suspected that its organ was one of the glands, probably the pineal. I did not

disregard the function of growth-regulation assigned to the pineal gland by endocrinologists, but merely surmised a secondary function wholly latent under the conditions of everyday life.

Under the terrific stimulus of drugs, this third eye was partially awakened, affording distorted, broken glimpses of that larger reality which the outward senses failed to mirror. Through it, perhaps, one could behold dimensions higher than the three to which our perceptions were limited. Small reliance, however, could be placed on the testimony of the organ; for I felt sure that no known drug was powerful enough to rouse it into full consciousness. It was like the untaught eye of a newborn babe, which beholds its surroundings without any true perception of the form, distance, perspective and relationship of objects. Thus the mad variety, the wavering, ever-shifting fantasy, of narcotic visions; thus their alternations and minglings of horror, splendor, grotesquery, obscurity. Yet through them infinite vistas of untold realms were shadowed darkly upon the mind of man.

I shall say only that I succeeded in demonstrating, through the graphic device that I had invented, the direct influence of narcotics on the pineal gland, and the temporary activating of that gland as a sort of optic organ. The reactions recorded by this instrument while I was enduring the effect of hashish were unusually strong, and markedly similar to those which the graph had detected in the human eye during the reception of sight-images. Thus was confirmed my thesis of an objective world behind the teeming phantasmagoria evoked by drugs.

It remained now to invent or compound a drug sufficiently potent to stimulate the new eye into full and mature awareness of this hidden world. I shall not record here the details of my many trials and failures with complicated mixtures of strange alkaloids. Nor shall I record the elements

of the composite super-drug through which I attained eventual success at the cost of a fatally shattered nervous system - or perhaps something worse. I do not wish others to pay the price that I have paid.

My first sensations under the new drug were similar to those induced by a strong dose of *Cannabis indica*. There was the same protraction of the time-sense, by which mere minutes were stretched out into ages; and the same spatial expansion, by which my laboratory walls appeared to recede to an immense distance, and my own body, as well as the familiar objects about me, extended themselves to prodigious height and length. The legs of my chair were tall as the famed sequoias. My hand and arm, reaching up to make sure that the graph was correctly adjusted on my forehead over the pineal gland, seemed to scale a gulf like that of some profound canyon. A carboy loomed like a giant monument.

All this was familiar to me, and I felt somewhat disappointed. Was the new compound a failure, like the others?

I closed my eyes, as I had often done before, to shut out any ordinary sight-impressions that might obscure the vision of the third optic. Certain details disappeared and others were added but the imagery on which I peered remained fundamentally the same. Then, gradually, there was a change, and the scene before me divided itself into what I can only describe as two different planes or levels, distinct from each other as water and land.

The first plane was composed of my immediate surroundings, the laboratory and its fixtures, which had now become transparent as if permeated by some sort of radio-active light. My own body shared in this transparency, but, together with all the objects around me, retained clearly separate outlines.

Beyond this immediate plane was the second, in which everything seemed to possess a comparative solidity and opaqueness. I gazed on a

medley of strange-angled forms that might have materialized from a geometrician's nightmare. These forms were immense, complicated, mysterious. Then, slowly, I perceived that they were an apparent extension of the forms in my own plane, thus accounting for my original impression that everything about me had stretched itself out to inordinate length and distance.

It is hard to describe exactly what I saw, since my vision doubtless included an extra dimension. My limbs and body, my chair, the tables, shelves, bottles and littered chemical apparatus, all seemed to protract themselves at incredibly oblique angles into the medley of super-Euclidean shapes that crowded the new world. My eyes, like those of an infant learning to see, gradually began to distinguish detail and establish proportion and perspective where all had seemed meaninglessly blurred and chaotic at first glance.

My attention centered itself on a figure that seemed to correspond to my own. This figure, seated on a vaguely chair-like structure, was of colossal size. It presented a hundred strange facets, convexities, concavities. However, I made out the various parts equivalent to human head, torso, arms and legs. The figure appeared to sit facing me, for there was a multi-angled suggestion of eyes, mouth and other features in the immensely proportioned head.

Was this, I wondered, a living entity like myself? If so, what was my relationship to this being in a world never before penetrated by human vision? [Had the super-drug revealed to me the *doppelganger* of my own self, in a fourth dimension?]

At length a very simple experiment occurred to another, there was the same apparent reversal that a reflection would present.

Now I rose to my feet and began to walk around the laboratory, tottering a little at first from that loss of control I have mentioned. The other-dimensional figure also rose and walked, with the same shaky and uncertain steps. I picked up a beaker. The entity took in his hand a baroquely shaped vessel and raised it aloft. From sheer weakness, the beaker slipped from my fingers, crashing into many fragments. The vessel held by the being dropped at the same moment, and its shards littered that otherworld floor.

It seemed that every movement I made was duplicated in perfect synchronism by this amazing *alter ego*.

An obvious but startling question now occurred to me. I went over to the table and took up the graduated bottle in which I kept my supply of the new drug. I measured out a fifth of the amount I had already taken, feeling that it would be reasonably safe to add this much to the dose. Dissolving the powder in a little water, I swallowed it.

Using vessels of more complex geometric form, the being in that other laboratory reproduced my every motion.

Was he too an experimenter, seeking to pierce the manifold veils of the cosmos? Did he see me, I wondered? Was he experiencing a revelation similar in kind to the one I experienced? Was he performing the acts that I performed, to test the correspondence that existed between us? Did all the objects, entities, causes and effects of his world possess their counterparts in mine?

Perhaps, I thought, the relation between the worlds was one of cause and effect. But if so, which world was primary, which secondary? Did my actions determine those of that alien self? Or did his determine mine?

I felt that my new visual sense was being sharpened by the small additional dose of the drug I had taken. The details of the strange dimension grew clearer, more distinct. Hitherto it had all been colorless, like the grey

tones of a photograph. Now I began to distinguish hues that were quite indescribable, since they did not belong to the known spectrum.

Feeling a little light-headed, I went over and stretched myself on a couch that I had placed in the laboratory for use during my experiments. Synchronously, the being in that other laboratory reclined on a vast, many-cubed object that corresponded to the couch in mine.

We lay facing each other, motionless. At length the vision blurred, becoming once more chaotic and distorted. Finally it faded, leaving only the familiar details of the room about me.

During my next experiment, I risked going out on the street while the drug's influence was at its height. Step by step, as I went, the vision changed with the shifting scene about me; and step by step I was accompanied in the vision by that being whom I had grown to regard as an other-cosmic self.

It was a double city that I beheld — the city of our own world, traversed by autos, by street-cars, by throngs of pedestrians — and a city of that alien plane, with vehicles, people, buildings, all corresponding to ours in movement or position, but vaster and more complex in their geometric forms.

Absorbed in that astounding revelation, I forgot the danger to which I was exposed. An auto, driven slowly, struck me with its fender as I stepped from the sidewalk at a crossing. As I fell, I saw that my visioned companion had been struck by one of the vehicles in his city, and was also falling.

I had sustained no injuries apart from a few slight bruises. Passersby helped me to my feet, while, in that other city, pedestrians performed the same service for my strange double.

I repeated the experiment under varying conditions, in city and country. Always I saw my ultra-dimensional double, in an equivalent situation,

duplicating my actions. It seemed that there was no person, animal, plant, machine, building, landscape, in our world which did not have its counterpart in the other. All happenings occurred coincidentally in the two spheres.

Then came the astounding change. I had deferred taking the drug for some days, realizing that my health had suffered too heavily from its use and that death might soon follow if I persisted in further experiments. During that time I had experienced some strange mental states, which I could not recall clearly afterwards. Also, there had been several odd lapses of consciousness, lasting for several hours, which were always preceded by mental confusion and a preoccupation with thoughts remote from my usual trend. In particular, there would come to me the thought of an absolute vacuum, between the worlds, apart from time and place. Through superior, godlike will-power, it seemed to me, a being might enter this vacuum and thus insulate himself from the cosmic laws that would otherwise control his destiny. Such insulation seemed desirable to me, and I would find myself willing it intently just as consciousness deserted me. Thus alone could I divorce my actions from those of the otherworld being, and escape the doom which menaced us both through repeated use of the powerful compound drug.

Feeling still too weak and ill to go out, I made the next experiment with the drug in my laboratory, lying on the couch. The drug acted as usual, the vision clarifying itself till I saw once more the vessels and furniture of that alien laboratory beyond my own. But, to my amazement, the vast, many-cubed couch, on which I had thought to see a reclining figure, was vacant! I looked everywhere about the place, but in vain, for the companion of my visions.

Then, for the first time in my use of the super-drug, I experienced the sensation of hearing. A voice began to speak, low, toneless, coming from no direction — and yet from all directions. Sometimes I thought it spoke in my own brain, rather than from any point in space. It said:

“Can you hear me? I am Abernarda Chameechamach, your twin in the four-dimensioned cosmos you have visioned.”

“Yes, I can hear you,” I replied. “Where are you?” Whether I spoke aloud, or merely thought the words, I am not sure.

“I have isolated myself in the vacuum of super-space,” was the answer. “It is the only way in which I can break the rapport between our existences — which must be broken if I am to escape the death that threatens you. In this vacuum, all laws and all forces are inoperative, except those of thought and will. I can will myself into the vacuum and out of it again. My thoughts can pass to your world and become audible to you in your present state under the influence of the drug.”

“But how can you do these things independently of me?” I asked.

“Because my will and my brain are superior to yours, though otherwise identical with them. Our worlds are twin, as you have realized; but mine, which has one more dimension than yours, is the primary one, the world of causes. Yours is the secondary world of effects. It was I who invented the super-drug, in my efforts to stimulate a new sense that would reveal cosmic reality. Your invention of it was the result of mine, just as your existence is the result of my existence. I alone of the people in this world, through the drug, have learned that there is a secondary sphere; and you alone, in yours, have visioned the primary sphere. *My knowledge, through a law of the higher dimension, enables me to act now upon the secondary world through thought alone.* Insulating myself in this vacuum, I have willed that you should perform actions from whose necessity I myself am exempt. Several

times the only result was a loss of consciousness on your part, corresponding to my stay in the vacuum. But now I have triumphed. You have taken the drug, while I stand aloof between the worlds, invisible, and apart from the chain of cause and effect.”

“Since you have not used the drug,” I asked, “how is it that you are conscious of me? Can you see me?”

“No, I cannot see you. But I am aware of you through a sense not dependent upon the drug: a sense that my very knowledge of your existence enables me to use. It is part of my superior mind power. I do not intend to use the drug again; but I wish that you shall continue to use it.”

“Why?” I queried.

“Because you will soon die from the effects of such use. I, abstaining, will escape death. Such a thing, I believe, has never before happened in the history of the double cosmos. Death, in your world, like birth and everything else, has always been the concomitant of a like happening in mine. What the outcome will be, I am not quite sure. But, by breaking the nexus between us, and outliving you, it may be that I shall never die.”

“But is my death possible without yours?” I questioned.

“I think that it is. It will result from the continuation of actions that would also cause my death, if I did not choose to interrupt them in myself. When your death approaches, I shall enter the vacuum again, where no cosmic cause or consequence can follow me. Thus I shall be doubly safe.”

For several hours past, I have been writing this account at my laboratory desk. Whatever happens to me — whether death or something stranger than death — a record of my incredible experiences will at least remain when I am gone.

Since my conversation with the being who calls himself Abernarda Chameechamach, I have tried to abstain wholly from the super-drug and

have several times delayed yielding to the impulse that makes me continue its use. I find myself wishing, *willing* intensely that Abernarda Chameechamach should take the drug while I refrain, and should perish in my stead.

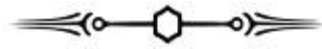
During my few recent experiments with the drug, I have seen only the empty laboratory of my trans-dimensional twin. Apparently, on each occasion, that being has absented himself in super-space. He has not spoken to me again.

However, I have a strange feeling that I am closer to him than at any time during our mutual visions or our one conversation. My physical enfeeblement has progressed pace by pace with a remarkable strengthening and enlargement of my mental faculties. It seems, indescribably, that another dimension has been added to my mind. I feel myself the possessor of senses beyond the normal five and the one activated by the drug. I believe that the powers of Abernarda Chameechamach, though directed against me, have to some extent passed into me through a cosmic law that not even he is able to abrogate from his station beyond time and place. There is a balance that must right itself, even though temporarily disturbed by the unknown forces of a four-dimensioned mind.

His very volition had transferred itself to me, and has turned back against him, though I am subject to him in ways already indicated. I am possessed by the image of the cosmic vacuum in which he isolates himself. More and more I feel in myself the desire, the will and the power to project myself bodily into the vacuum, and thus escape the chain of consequences that began with the discovery of the super-drug. What, I wonder, will happen if I should escape in this manner before the drug kills me? What will happen to me, and to Abernarda Chameechamach, if we should meet face to face in that void between the worlds of our double cosmos?

Will the meeting mean annihilation for us both? Will we survive as two entities — or a single entity? I can only wait and conjecture. Does that other also doubt and wonder while he waits? Are there two of us — or is there only one?

Strange Shadows



DOWNING HIS THIRTEENTH dry Martini, Gaylord Jones drew a complacent sigh and regarded the barroom floor with grave attention. He was drunk. He knew that he was drunk. With superb lucidity, he calculated the exact degree of his inebriation.

A great white light was pivoted in his brain. He could turn this light, instantly, on the most obscure corners of the nothingness called life. At last he was able to appreciate the absurd logic of the cosmos. It was all very simple. Nothing mattered in the least.

It was all very simple, and nothing mattered as long as one could keep himself sufficiently pickled. Ah, that was the problem. Reflecting long and deeply, Jones decided that just one more Martini would help to maintain his intoxication at the right stage.

He had, however, consumed three drinks in a row at this particular bar. The Martinis were well mixed. The bartender's manners were unexceptionable. But Jones felt that he should not play any favorites when it came to barrooms. There were so many others that deserved his patronage. In fact, there was one just around the corner on his homeward route.

"I wonder often what the vintners buy one-half so precious as the stuff they sell," he quoted, muttering to himself, as he descended carefully from his seat.

Jones prided himself on knowing his capacity. So far, he had never had the misfortune to overestimate it. He could carry one, two, three, even four more drinks if necessary, without deviating from the proverbial chalk line.

Every night, for at least a month past, he had collected a full cargo at various alcoholic ports between his office and hotel. The stuff never hurt him. He had never been known to stagger or even wobble at any point along the route. His morning headaches, if any, were light and fleeting.

He stood up and looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar. Yes, he could hold his liquor. No casual observer would be able to tell that he had had three Martinis, let alone thirteen. His eyes were clear, his face no redder or paler than usual. He adjusted his tie neatly, bade the bartender a crisp goodnight, and started toward the door.

Of course, his locomotor faculties were under perfect control. He knew that they would not fail him as long as he observed due caution and didn't move too precipitately. His senses had never played him tricks either. But, as he crossed the long room, Jones received a curious impression. The room was empty except for a few late patrons at the bar or remote tables. Yet once, twice, thrice, it seemed to him that he had trodden on someone's heels. It was a baffling and disconcerting sensation, since, visibly, no one was in front of him or even near at hand. With some effort, each time, he checked himself from stumbling.

Jones went on, feeling slightly disturbed and annoyed. Again, as he approached the door, the mysterious sensation was repeated. It was as if his toes had collided with the heel of some stranger who preceded him down the room. This time, Jones nearly fell on his face before he could recover himself.

"Who the hell—" he started to mumble. But, as before, there was no one, nothing, against whom or which he could have tripped. Looking down, he could see only his own shadow, now stretching doorward in the light cast by the electric chandeliers.

Jones stood peering at the shadow with a vague but growing puzzlement. It was a funny sort of shadow, he thought. There must be something queer about the lights in that barroom. It didn't look like his own shadow, or, in fact, the shadow of any human being. He wasn't squeamish. He had never been a stickler for aesthetic propriety or any kind of propriety. But he felt a sense of actual shock when he began to consider the various things that were wrong with the shadow's outline.

Though he himself was correctly attired, there was no suggestion that the caster of the shadow wore either clothing, hat or shoes. Indeed, it hardly seemed to indicate any sort of creature that would wear clothing.

Jones thought of the gargoyles of Notre Dame. He thought of antique satyrs. He thought of goats and swine. The shadow was gargoyleish, it was satyr-like. It was goatish and porcine — it was even worse. It was the adumbration of some shambling, obscene, pot-bellied monster, trying to stand upright like a man on its hind legs, and holding its forelegs a little away from the body on each hand.

Its edges were hairy as the silhouette of an ape. Appendages that were huge ears or horns rose above its swollen head. The rear shanks were bent at a bestial angle. Something like a tail depended between them. The four feet gave the appearance of hooves. The two lifted feet were visibly cloven.

Apart from these deformities of outline, the shadow possessed an unnatural thick blackness. It was like a pool of tar. Sometimes it seemed to swell upward from the floor, to take on a third dimension.

Sobriety had almost returned to Jones. But now the thirteen cumulative Martinis resumed their work. By one of those sudden shifts of a drunkard's mood, he began to forget his feelings of shock and perplexity. The shadow's very grotesquery began to amuse him.

“Must be another guy’s shadow,” he chuckled. “But what a guy!” He stepped forward cautiously, holding out his right arm at a dead level and parting all the fingers of his right hand. The shadow moved with him. Its right fore-member rose and protruded at the angle of his arm. But still there was only the shadow of a cloven hoof where the shadows of five outspread fingers should have registered.

Jones shook his head bewilderedly. Maybe it was the lights, after all. There must be some explanation.

He stepped backward, maintaining a balance that had become slightly precarious. This time, the shadow did not follow his change of position. It lay as before, its hind hooves separated from his own nattily shod feet by an interval of light.

Jones felt a confused outrage. Here was a problem that defied the blazing white logic of alcohol. What could one make of a shadow that not only failed to reproduce its owner’s periphery, but refused to follow all his movements?

To make matters worse, he saw that the shadow had now begun to display an activity of its own. Lurching and weaving while he stood stock still, it danced abominably from side to side on the floor, like the shadow of a drunken satyr. It capered and cavorted. It made vile gestures with its forelegs.

At this moment a patrolman, parched, no doubt, from his long evening vigil, entered the barroom. He was formidably tall and broad. Giving Jones the tail of a truculent eye, he passed on toward the bar without seeming to notice the outrageous behavior of Jones’ errant shadow.

Behind the patrolman’s bulk there trailed a shadow like that of some diminutive monkey. It appeared to cower at his heels. It seemed to scamper

and scuttle behind the arrogant pomp of his advance. It was incredibly thin, wizened, puny-looking.

Jones rubbed his eyes. Here, perhaps, was something to reassure him. If his own shadow had gone screwy, the patrolman's was equally haywire.

This conclusion was instantly confirmed. The shadow that, by courtesy, Jones called his own, had ceased its indecorous caperings. It wheeled about suddenly and ran past him as if following the officer. At the same time the policeman's monkey-like shadow detached itself from its owners' heels and fled swiftly toward a remote corner of the room. Jones' shadow pursued it in great, goatish leaps, with gesticulations of obscene anger and menace. The officer, quite oblivious of his loss, continued barward. Jones heard him order a beer.

Jones decided that he had lingered all too long in that particular drinking-place. Matters had grown slightly embarrassing, not to say compromising. Shadow or no shadow, he would speed his progress to the next bar. After two or three additional Martinis, he could manage well enough without a shadow. Good riddance, anyway. Let the policeman keep the damned thing in order if he could.

The street outside was well-lighted but almost empty of pedestrians. With a sense of urgency and compulsion, Jones hurried to the saloon around the corner. He avoided looking down at the pavement as he went.

Ordering three Martinis, he drank them down as fast as the bartender could mix and pour them. The result was all that he had hoped for. His feeling of cosmic detachment and independence returned to him. What was a shadow, anyway? The one cast by the bartender's hand and arm, moving over the bar, was not that of a normal human limb; but Jones refused to consider it. He could take his shadows or leave them.

He took three more drinks. His sense of alcoholic caution told him that it was now curfew-time. Promptly, though a little unsteadily, he began the last lap of his homeward journey.

Somewhere on the way, he perceived rather vaguely that his shadow had rejoined him. It was more monstrous than ever under the streetlamps — more obscene and unnatural. Then, suddenly, there were *two* shadows. This, however, was not surprising, since he had begun to see telephone-posts, lights, cars, hydrants, people, and other objects along his route in duplicate.

He awoke the next morning with a dull headache and a confused impression that the scheme of things had somehow gone wrong. Just how or why it had gone wrong he could not remember at first. But he had had one or two drinks too many and had fallen asleep in his clothes on top of the bedding.

Groaning, he pulled himself from the bed and stood up groggily with his back to the bright sunlight that streamed in through his apartment windows. It seemed that something rose with him — a black, solid silhouette that stood erect for an instant in the air. Horribly startled, he saw the thing resolve itself into a shadow stretching across the floor. It was the gargoylish, goatish, satyrish, porcine shadow of the previous night.

It was something that neither sunlight nor lamplight, by any trick or distortion, could conceivably have wrought from Jones' head, limbs and body. In the bright glare, it was blacker, grosser, more hirsute than before. Curiously, it was broader and less elongated than a shadow should have been in the full early light.

It was like some foul incubus of legend — a separate entity that companioned him in place of his rightful shadow.

Jones felt thoroughly frightened. He was sober, with the profound, excessive sobriety of the morning after. He did not believe in the

supernatural. Plainly, he had become the victim of a set of bizarre hallucinations, confined to one subject. Otherwise, his sensory perceptions were quite normal. Perhaps, without realizing it, he had been drinking too much and had developed a new kind of delirium tremens. He knew that alcoholism didn't always result in the seeing of mauve elephants and cerise reptiles.

Or maybe it was something else. There were all sorts of obscure mental diseases, symptomized by aberrant or deluded sense-perceptions. He knew little of such things, but knew that the possibilities were infinitely various and terrifying.

Averting his eyes from the shadow, he fled to his bathroom, where there was no direct sunlight. Even here he had the sensation of being accompanied. Again, as in the barroom, he seemed to stumble over the heels of some unseen person who had preceded him.

With nightmare difficulty he concentrated on the tasks of washing and shaving himself. A dreadful gulf had opened at his feet amid the solid reality of things.

A clock struck somewhere in the apartment-house, and Jones realized that he had overslept and must hurry to his office. There was no time for breakfast, even if he had not lacked the appetite.

Dogged by his weirdly altered shadow, he went out on the crowded street in the clear April morning. Embarrassment mingled with his sense of horror. It seemed that everyone must notice the black changeling that followed him like a wizard's familiar.

However, the early throng, hurrying intently to the day's work or pleasure, paid no more attention to Jones and his shadow than on any other morning. It was more and more obvious that he suffered from some sort of visual hallucination: for the people about him were apparently quite

untroubled by the oddities which he perceived in their shadows as well as in his own.

Studying these shadows with a morbid fascination as they passed by on the walls and pavements, Jones well-nigh forgot the dark miscreation at his own heels. It was like looking at the shadows of some hellish menagerie. Among them all, there was none that corresponded to the visible physique of its owner. And now and then some person went by, like the legendary vampire, without appearing to cast a shadow at all.

Demure young girls were attended by adumbrations that might have been those of lascivious she-apes or coquetting sphinxes. A benign priest was followed by the shadow of some murderous devil. A rich and popular society matron was paired with the four-legged shadow of a humpbacked cow. Shadows like those of hyenas trotted behind respectable bankers and aldermen.

Jones noted that the shadows cast by inorganic objects, such as trees and buildings, had not shared in the change. But the shadows of animals bore as little likeness to their casters as those of men. Oddly, those of dogs and horses were often quasihuman, seeming to indicate a rise rather than a degradation in the scale of being.

Sometimes, as on the evening before, Jones witnessed the incredible behavior of shadows that moved and acted with complete detachment from their owners. He saw pantomimes that were grotesque, ludicrous, often indecent.

It was in the mental state of a man bewitched that he reached the office of his young but thriving insurance business. Miss Owens, the rather mature typist, was already settled at her machine. She raised her well-plucked eyebrows at his lateness.

Jones, trying to control his whirling wits and fix them on the day's work, was thankful for the diffused light in the office at that hour. Somehow, he succeeded in applying himself to a pile of letters, and even dictated a few replies.

Part of the morning went by. At times the mad mystery that troubled him receded to the margin of consciousness. It was too unreal, too much like the phantasms of dreams. But he would go easy on drinking in the future. No doubt the hallucinations would wear off when he had freed his system from any residue of alcohol. Perhaps his nerves were already fighting themselves and he wouldn't see any more crazy shadows.

At that moment he happened to look over at Miss Owens. The rays of the sun in its transit had now entered the window, striking directly across her and making a clear shadow on the floor beyond.

Jones, who was no prude, almost blushed at the outlines formed by that shadow. It showed a figure that was not only outrageously unclothed but betrayed proclivities more suitable to a witches' Sabbath than a modern business office. It moved forward in an unseemly fashion while Miss Owens remained seated. Beside it in the broad patch of sunlight a second shadow appeared — the misshapen one that Jones had been forced to call his own

Miss Owens, looking up from the Remington, intercepted her employer's eye. His expression seemed to startle her. A natural flush deepened her brunette rouge.

"Is there anything wrong, Mr. Jones?" she queried.

"Oh, nothing at all," said Jones, shamefacedly, averting his gaze from the two shadows. He plunged again into his correspondence and did not venture to look up till the sun had passed from the window.

That evening he visited a doctor instead of making the usual round of barrooms.

The doctor frowned very learnedly as Jones described his strange affliction. He took Jones' pulse and temperature, tested his knee-jerk and other reflexes, flashed a light into his eyes, looked at his tongue.

"You haven't any fever, and there's no sign of d.t.," he announced finally. "Your nerves seem to be sound though jumpy. I don't think you're likely to go insane — at least not for some time. Probably it's in your eyes. You'd better see a good oculist tomorrow. In the meanwhile I'll prescribe a sedative for your nervousness. Of course you ought to ease up on liquor — maybe the alcohol is affecting your eyesight."

Jones hardly heard the doctor's advice. He had been studying the doctor's shadow, flung across an expansive rug by a tall and powerful floor-lamp. It was the least human and most unpleasant of all the shadows he had yet seen. It had the contours and the posture of a ghoul stooping over a ripe carrion.

After procuring at a nearby pharmacy the prescribed sedative, Jones went to his apartment early. It had become more and more of an ordeal to pass through crowds and lighted places. He had wolfed down some food ordered at random in a small restaurant. Resolutely he tried to avoid looking at people's shadows; but a sick curiosity betrayed him again and again. He had never dreamt that any outlines made by the mere interception of light could contain the foul grotesquery that he saw everywhere. Goblins had seemed to menace him, she-devils had sought to seduce him, in the shadows of worthy men and good women.

He did not turn on the lights in his apartment but groped his way to an arm-chair and sat for a long time in darkness. At last he rose and lit a taper

that stood on the table. By its dim, soft light he measured out and drank his medicine. Then, once more in darkness, he went to bed.

His nerves twittered still, and the sedative did not bring the sleep for which he had hoped. Lying with open eyes, he perceived presently that something darker than the gloom towered gigantically from the foot of his bed. It grew more definite, more distinct. It was the Shadow. It seemed to weigh tangibly upon him, crushing his feet with its black hooves. An opaque ghost, an ebon eidolon, it stood there through many nightmare hours, fading only with the approach of dawn.

Jones's weird bedevilment continued for two more days. At the end of that time he was verging on a nervous collapse from the strain. The mystery was a mad breach in natural logic, and he hated the illogical. It tormented him more and more, beyond endurance. Each evening he longed for a row of Martinis, but he did not dare to seek their dubious relief.

He knew that doctors and oculists could not help him. Nor could he confide his trouble to friends or acquaintances, who would merely have thought him insane.

At last he remembered Arthur Quintain, whom he had not seen for some months. Quintain lived in the same city, and Jones had known him rather distantly for some years. He was a queer bird, and had made a lifelong study of such fantastic matters as demonology and occultism. He, at least, would not laugh at Jones' experience or consider him mad. Jones, of course, was still a skeptic when it came to anything occult. But there would be no harm in hearing what the fellow had to say.

Quintain, gaunt and grey-halted but unbowed by his many years of bookish application, received Jones in a white-walled study lit by bluish lamps. His eyes, uncannily brilliant, seemed to scan the inmost thoughts of his visitor.

“Something is troubling you greatly,” he said at once. “Otherwise you would not have come to me.”

Jones plunged into a detailed account of the visual phenomena that plagued him. While he talked, he was eyeing with nervous disgust the immense shadow thrown obliquely on the wall beside Quintain’s standing figure. It was the shadow of some medieval demon, grossly abominous, outrageously wattled and snouted and crested.

“You have heard of the astral plane?” Quintain questioned when his visitor had finished speaking.

“Yes,” admitted Jones, dubiously.

“This plane, which coexists in the same space with the physical world, is of course imperceptible to normal senses. But there are dormant centers of astral perception in the brain which can sometimes be stimulated abnormally by drugs or alcohol. The vision thus obtained is always very partial and distorted, and does not correspond to the vision of a true seer.

“Something of the sort seems to have resulted in your case, from prolonged excessive drinking. The vision is curiously limited, since, as far as I can make out, you have been seeing merely the astral aspect of your own shadow and the shadows of others.

“Evidently you haven’t seen anything very pleasant or flattering. The shadows, as you describe them, seem to have embodied all the basest tendencies of human nature — the latent worst that exists in everyone. Sometimes you saw them express these tendencies by breaking away and acting independently of their owners. And you saw people without shadows at all, which would signify living death.

“Of course your vision wasn’t literal. You were trying to interpret, with an unused and perniciously activated sense, the phenomena of a hidden world.”

“The shadow, I might say in further explanation, is one of the seven essential parts or principles of the complete human entity, according to ancient Egyptian occultism. It is no less important than the soul or the earthly and etheric bodies. It is revealed by light but does not cease to exist in darkness.

“Hence, when your astral vision had reached its strongest, you were able to see your own shadow standing by night at the foot of your bed.” Jones was somewhat dazed by this explanation. “Thanks a lot,” he said.

“Of course you don’t believe me,” Quintain continued. “You are the typical materialist, and would probably understand me almost as well if I were talking in Sanskrit. I’ll admit, however, that there are some things in your experience that puzzle me. I’ve never heard of a case like it Your astral sense of touch must have been slightly active at times, as well as the sense of sight, since you had the sensation of stumbling over some unseen object. *It was your own shadow over which you stumbled.*”

“It’s all too much for me,” Jones confessed. “But your explanation is no screwier than the things I’ve been seeing. However, if what you tell me is true, why should the shadows take such queer and horrible forms?”

“I could hazard a theory about that also,” said Quintain rather dryly. “But I doubt if it would interest you.” After a slight pause he resumed: “I think your higher spiritual faculties, of which you are wholly unconscious, are involved there. The shadows seem to be a sort of warning from your highest state to your lowest self a warning of the quite undesirable state and plane of being to which alcohol may degrade you if you persist in its use through many more incarnations. Their bestial and fiendish shapes are, so to speak, symbolic of what you may come to in the end.”

Jones, at this juncture, had become inattentive. With a shock of bewildered relief he noticed that Quintain’s shadow and his own had lost

their monstrosity of outline and were now such as their figures would normally cast on a lamp lit wall. “It’s gone,” he cried out.

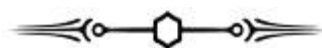
“I expected that,” said Quintain. “Your were wise to stop drinking when you did. In future, I hope you won’t try to kill quite so many Martinis. You might see far worse things than those shadows — in fact, you are very lucky not to have seen them already.”

After an interval of reflective silence, he added: “Oh, by the way, what was my shadow like?”

Jones hesitated. What was it Quintain had said — that the shadows had apparently expressed the worst that was latent in everyone? Of course he didn’t believe any of that stuff. But Quintain did.

“Sorry, I forgot to notice,” he said tactfully.

Nemesis of the Unfinished



THE AUTHENTIC TALENT of Francis La Porte, fiction-writer, was allied with an industry no less than prodigious. Unfortunately, he was self-critical to an excessive degree. Dissatisfaction, morbid and meticulous, kept him from finishing more than one manuscript out of a dozen. Though editors importuned him for stories and bought readily the few that he submitted, Francis could seldom outdistance the wolf by a full running jump.

He had left hundreds of stories in various stages of incompleteness, clipped together with the double or triple carbons that he was always careful to make. Many ran to the size of novelettes or novels; some existed only as a few beginning paragraphs. Often he had written several variant versions, carried to more or less length. There were also countless synopses of tales attempted or unbegun.

They crammed the drawers of his desk to overflowing, they bulged and towered in insecure piles from the boxes that were stacked along the walls of his study. These voluminous abortions were the labor of a lifetime.

Most of them were eldritch tales of horror and death, of wizardry and diabolism. Their pages teemed with specters and cadavers, with ghouls and *loups-garous* and poltergeists.

Often they haunted La Porte like a bad conscience. Sometimes they seemed to talk to him and reproach him with ghostly whispers in the dark hours before dawn. He would fall asleep vowing to complete one or more of them without further procrastination.

In spite of such resolutions, the dust still thickened on the piled reams. A new day would always bring Francis an idea for a new plot. Occasionally he

would complete one of his shorter and simpler tales, and would receive in due time a small check from *Outlandish Stories* or *Eerie Narratives*. Then he would indulge in one of his rare debauches of food and wine, and his brain would fume with wild inspirations that he was seldom able to recall afterwards.

Though he did not suspect, La Porte was in the position of a necromancer who has called up spirits from the deep without knowing how to control or dismiss them.

He had fallen asleep one night after absorbing nearly a half-gallon of cheap claret, bought from the proceeds of a recent sale. His slumber was heavy but brief. It seemed that a vague commotion, in which he distinguished articulate voices, had awakened him. Puzzled, and still confused by his potations, he listened intently for some moments but the noises had ceased. Then suddenly there was a sound like the light rustling of paper. Then a louder noise as if great masses of paper were sliding and shifting. Then conversation, as if a crowd of people were talking all at once. It was an unintelligible babel, and he could determine nothing except that the noises came from the direction of his workroom.

La Porte's spine began to tingle as he sat up in bed. The sounds were eerie and mysterious as anything that he had ever imagined in his tales of nocturnal terror. It seemed now that he was overhearing some bizarre and sinister dialogue, in which voices of unhuman timbre replied to others that were apparently human. Once or twice he caught his own name uttered in strange gibbering tones, somehow fraught with the sense of inimical conspiracy.

La Porte sprang out of bed. Lighting an oil-lamp and going into his study, he peered into every corner but saw only the stacks of overpiled manuscripts. Apparently the piles were undisturbed but he seemed to see

them through a thick haze. At the same time he began to choke and cough. Going closer to inspect the manuscripts, he perceived that the accumulated dust of months and years had been shaken from their massed reams.

He searched the room repeatedly but found no further sign of invasion either human or supernatural. Perhaps some sudden gust had performed the mysterious office of dusting the paper piles. But the windows were all closed, and the night outside was windless. He returned to bed: but sleep refused to visit him again.

There was no repetition of the rustlings and voices that had seemed to awaken him. He began to wonder if he had been the victim of some distempered dream inspired by the evening's wine. Finally he convinced himself that this was the only credible explanation.

The next morning, moved by an unwonted impulse, La Porte selected a manuscript at random from the heaps of unfinished material. It was entitled *Incomplete Sorceries*, and dealt with a man who had achieved partial power over demons and elementals, but was still seeking certain lost formulae that were requisite to full masterdom. La Porte had abandoned the tale through indecision regarding the alternate solutions of the sorcerer's problem suggested by his all too fertile fancy. He sat down at the typewriter, determined that he would finish the story to his satisfaction.

For once, he did not hesitate over variant wordings or divergencies of plot-development. It all seemed miraculously clear to him, and he wrote steadily through the forenoon and afternoon and evening. At midnight he ended the last paragraph, in which, after many perils and tribulations, the sorcerer stood triumphant amid his infrangible circles, compelling the dread kings of the four infernal quarters to serve his least whim.

La Porte felt that he had seldom written so well. The story should bring him a substantial check, as well as the acclaim of his many faithful but

impatient admirers. He would send it out in the morning mail after a few possible retouchings. A new title was manifestly required by the denouement: he would think of one easily after a night's sleep.

He had almost forgotten the queer dream that had followed his recent bacchanal. Again he slept deeply, but not too soundly. At intervals some portion of his brain, emerging numbly from oblivion, seemed to hear the recurrent clatter of his old Remington in the next room. Drugged with fatigue, he did not awaken fully to the strangeness of the sound under such circumstances but accepted it without question as one accepts the unexplained vagaries of dreamland.

After his meager breakfast La Porte began to reread *Incomplete Sorceries*, with his pencil poised for errors of typing or minor revisions. He found nothing to change in the first few pages, written months before, and hastened over their familiar incidents to the point at which he had begun his continuation of the sorcerer's vicissitudes. Here he paused in astonishment, for he could not remember writing a single sentence of the freshly typed paragraphs! The astonishment became stupefaction as he went on: the plot, the incidents, the whole trend of development, were alien to what he had conceived and set down.

It was as if some demon-guided hand had reversed and perverted the story. Pandemonium, and the lords of Pandemonium, prevailed throughout. The sorcerer, with all his formulae, was a mere pawn moved hither and thither at their will, in a monstrous game for supremacy over souls and planets and galaxies. The very style was foreign to La Porte's usual manner: it was studded with strange archaisms and neologisms; it burned with phrases like hellish gems; it blazed and vaped with images that were like censers of evil before Satanic altars.

More than once, La Porte wanted to drop the horribly transfigured tale. But a baleful fascination, mingling with his dumbfoundment and incredulity, held him to the end where the hapless necromancer was crushed into pulp beneath the ponderous grimoires he had collected in his lifelong search for mastery. It was only then that La Porte could lay down the manuscript. His fingers trembled as if they had touched the coils of some deadly serpent.

Tormenting his brain for some tenable explanation, he recalled the dreamlike clattering of the Remington that he had seemed to hear in slumber. Was it possible that he had risen from his bed and had rewritten the story in a somnambulistic state? Was it the work of some spectral or demoniac hand? Unmistakably the typing had been done on his own machine: several slightly blurred letters and punctuation-marks occurred throughout the entire manuscript.

The mystery disturbed him beyond measure. He had never found in himself the least tendency to sleepwalking or to trance states of any kind. Though the supernatural was, so to speak, his literary stock-in-trade, his reason refused to accept the ideas of an extrahuman agency.

Unable to resolve the problem, La Porte tried to busy himself with the beginning of a new tale. But concentration was impossible, since he could not dismiss the unanswered riddle from his thoughts for a moment.

Abandoning all further effort to work, he left the house with hurried steps, as if driven by the spurs of an incubus.

It was many hours later that La Porte wandered homeward rather unsteadily by the rays of a cloud-strangled moon. Forgetting his usual economy, he had consumed numberless brandies at a village bar. He did not care for the people who frequented such places; but somehow he had been reluctant to leave. Never before had he been loathe to face the solitude of

his cabin, peopled only with books and manuscripts, with unwritten and half-written fantasies.

Still dimly troubled by the mystery that had driven him forth, he fell across the unmade bed without undressing or even lighting a lamp, and slid into drunken slumber.

Wild dreams came to visit him anon. Weird voices shrieked and muttered in his ears, indistinct but nightmarish figures milled around him like the dancers of some demonian Sabbat. Amid the voices that seemed to conspire against his peace and safety, he heard the incessant click and rattle of a typewriter. There was a clacking as of drawers opened and shut without cessation, a multitudinous rustling as of paper slithering from place to place in unaccountable sibilant movement.

La Porte awoke from endless repetitions of this dream — to find that the noises still continued. Again, as on a former occasion, he sprang from bed, lit his lamp, and entered the workroom from which the sounds and voices appeared to come.

Still dazed with sleep and inebriation, his eyes beheld a vast chamber whose roof and walls receded beyond the illumination of the lamp he carried in shaking fingers. Amid this chamber his manuscripts rose in massive piles, multiplied and magnified as if by the black sorcery of hashish. They seemed to loom above him with topless tiers, lost in the reaches of some Avernian vault.

On the desk of the room's center his Remington, operated as if by some unseen entity, ran and clattered with infernal speed. Black lines appeared momentarily on the sheet that emerged rapidly from the roller.

The floor was covered with other sheets, lying singly or in heaps, that slid and rustled about the chamber in mysterious perpetual agitation. The air was filled with the eerie gibberings and whispers that had haunted La

Porte's dreams and awakened him. They came, it seemed, from nowhere and everywhere — from the scattered pages on the floor, from the typewriter desk, from the tiered boxes and reams that beetled into nightmare vastness, and from the apparent vacancy of space itself.

La Porte felt on his face the breathing of terrible powers, of eldritch and forbidden things, as he stood in hesitant stupor on the threshold. A wind sprang up, he knew not whence, winding and wreathing about him in icy serpentine volumes. He thought that the room grew vaster, that the floor heaved and tilted at strange impossible angles, that the towers and battlements of swollen manuscripts leaned toward him in perilous inclination.

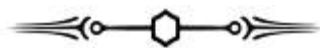
The weird wind strengthened and swiftened, sweeping up the numberless loose sheets in a wild storm, and extinguishing the lamp that he held in his nerveless hand. Darkness fell — a darkness of vertigo and delirium, into which La Porte was hurled resistlessly, falling through endless gulfs, battling with countless evil things that swooped upon him from all directions, and heating a thunder as of loosened avalanches

Neighbors, noticing the absence of smoke from La Porte's chimney, and missing him on the road to the village, became sufficiently alarmed to investigate after the third day. Opening the unlocked outer door, they saw the littered paper, mingled with fragments of a shattered kerosene lamp, that overflowed the threshold of his workroom.

Ream upon ream of paper almost filled the room itself: a mountain of heaped and dishevelled manuscripts covering the one chair and desk and typewriter with its high-piled summit. They found Francis La Porte lying in a convulsed posture beneath the pile. In his rigid hands, up-thrust protectively before his face, were clutched the sheets of several thick manuscripts, torn and ripped asunder as if in some violent struggle. Other

sheets, torn to confetti-like pieces, strewn his upturned body. Still others were locked in a tetanic rigor between his bared teeth.

The Dart of Rasasfa



JON MONTROSE AND HIS WIFE MILDRED were passing Belaran, a sun obscured to earth-astronomers by a small dense nebula many [ten] million miles beyond Alpha Centauri. Its existence had been discovered nine years previously by an expedition which had gone by to remoter spatial objectives. Jon and Mildred were the only crew of the space-flier *Daedalus* in which they had left earth two years before, and were making maximum speed of several light-years a week by atomic power.

In their reflectors Belaran, a white sun similar to our own, displayed a system of seven worlds. The tint was unusual — most suns in proximity to nebulae were blue or red. They were nearest to the fourth world when the trouble began — a sudden and violent veering toward the planet, which lay to starboard. Jon's quick inspection showed that the steering apparatus was in good order. Some obscure magnetic force, not classified by their instruments, was drawing them downward to the unknown world, which soon revealed a conformation of plains and mountains below. The plains broadened, the mountains leapt upward with tops and slopes that assumed color and sharp definitude.

“God! We're going to crash!” Jon cried. He and Mildred watched helplessly as the vessel slanted past the high peaks with no visible snow but a lichen-like purplish vegetation. They dipped into a long steep ravine showing threads of water or other liquid at the bottom, and then landed on a sort of shelf, their prow plunging into soil and rocks deeply enough to hold the ship from sliding further.

Stunned by the impact, the voyagers soon regained full consciousness. They had held instinctively to the steering seat, but were bruised and bleeding. The engines grew silent. Air blowing in their faces drew their attention to the manhole in the slanted wall. It had been forced half open, and their atmosphere was tempered by a cool fresh breeze from outside which seemed to have no deleterious effects but was perhaps a little higher in oxygen than that to which they were accustomed.

Jon examined the atomic engines. They had been turned off automatically by a breakage in the rod which connected them with the steering gear. The rod was made of carborundum and zeronium, the last-named a new element found on the moon and certain other planets. How it had been broken, unless flawed, was a mystery: the alloy was harder than diamond. Unless the break could be mended, they would be powerless to resume their journey.

Jon cursed in a low voice, remembering that they had neglected to bring along any spare parts, and wondering if the local landscape would afford the required materials. If so, they had a furnace for smelting and fusing and could mend the rod, even if rather crudely.

He told Mildred the problem, adding: "There's nothing for us to do except get out and hunt. Otherwise we'll be stuck here till the Second Coming."

He packed a knapsack with food and a thermos bottle of coffee, and gave it to Mildred. Then, carrying slung from his shoulders a pick and shovel and a complicated new instrument for detecting all known minerals and elements up to a depth of ten or more feet, he forced the manhole lid open enough to climb out and descend to the ledge on a crazily slanted ladder. His wife followed, having strapped the knapsack about her neck.

They could see much of the surrounding terrain. Far in the distance of the flat country below, towers or tall buildings glimmered. At their feet a series of rough projections in the stone made feasible their descent to the stream-bed where liquid pools and cascades gurgled between steep walls partly mantled with lichen or other short growth harder to classify.

They climbed down to the stream-bed, testing each of the salients carefully before trusting their full weight upon it. The pools were indistinguishable from common water at close view but might contain poisonous elements. They did not pause to test it but stepped across the stream and began to ascend the opposite side, stopping many times to try the detection instrument, which showed only minerals and metals of ordinary kind, including traces of gold, silver, iron, and mercury.

By slow degrees they worked diagonally toward the plain, crossing several ridges and streams, one of the latter a cataract which they had to circumnavigate laboriously. At last, on a downward slope, they found evidence of carborundum; and, not far away, a small deposit of zeronium. Jon started to dig. He had gone down about five feet and had struck the carborundum, Mildred over beside him, when an interruption occurred. A heavy net of some clinging ropy material dropped over their heads and tightened. Beyond the meshes a group of incredible beings, reptile-headed but upright, bluish in color, with two hands and feet, were standing over them, holding the long handle of the net. One of these beings carried a sharp-pointed spear with which he touched them in turn, pricking through their clothes between the meshes. Unconsciousness quickly followed a spreading numbness at the touch of the spear.

Mildred awoke in a dungeon-like roofed enclosure, lit sparsely by small globes in the walls which had the look of staring violescent eyes. She was lying on a low couch of some soft and colorless material. Beside her on the

floor was a flattish bowl containing, she conjectured, some sort of food-stuff. Still dazed and sick, she did not feel tempted to taste it. Anyway, the odor was not appetizing: it suggested stale fish.

She raised herself dizzily on her elbow. The floor seemed to reel, the lights in the walls to dance. Around a corner, swaying with the room's apparent motion, walked three of the bluish reptile-headed beings. One of them strapped an apparatus like an electrode to her forehead and held the other end to his own. She noticed for the first time that his hands were four-fingered. She heard in her brain a weird buzzing which began to shape itself into sounds that she could not recognize as words until after an interval. Presently she surmised that the sounds were a telepathic attempt at translation into English from a radically different tongue, in which many letters were hissed rather than spoken, but in words that were well-nigh unpronounceable by the human mouth-structure.

Mildred made out: "To the temple you must go where waits Asasfa *{sic}* Other person not yourself to sacrifice. Will result for us much benefit... much learning."

The sounds changed, becoming more rapid and less distinct, with a tone of stern command. Perhaps a hyponotic suggestion was being administered. At any rate she could not remember its nature or import when the being withdrew the instrument.

Her captors drew her upright. Their clammy touch made her shudder. Mildred's arms were supported while a reptile mask, whitish rather than blue, was fastened over her face. She became aware for the first time that she had been quite naked, when a short pale dress was draped around her. Then they led her from the room through an open doorway and up several flights of coiling steps and along endless dim corridors.

Somewhere the hilt of a stained, blackish, upward-pointing knife was placed in her hand, and her fingers were clasped tightly around it by cold reptile pressure. She could not recall why, or for what purpose, she was to use it. But a strong sense of predestination was upon her, and a feeling that she would be enlightened in due time.

Light opened before her. She was led through a high broad doorway into a vast edifice where a reptile being, taller than any she had yet seen, stood before an open alcove which gave forth a golden glimmering. The alcove's entrance looked like a huge broad keyhole. The being held in his hand a sickle-butted dart. The walls of the alcove behind him seemed inlaid with oblique oblongs of yellow mosaic, and the floor was partly littered with unnameable objects.

Mildred was half-pushed, half-carried, and made to stand on an indented pedestal at the right hand of the armed entity. She faced a deeply bowing silent congregation of reptilians in the nave, which appeared lit by sunlight between pillars at the rear.

Still half dazed, she perceived that a man had entered at the left and had paused in front of the dart-bearer. For a while she failed to recognize that the man was Jon: his features seemed blurred with the faces of others she had known, had liked or disliked in former years. An impulse of sudden hatred made her raise the black knife, and she was about to fling it toward him.

She never knew what checked her. Perhaps the hypnotic command implanted in her mind had suddenly been reversed. She paused, while the dart-bearer lifted his weapon and hurled it violently at Jon, piercing his shirt at the side as he dodged agilely with muscles trained by a multitude of tasks.

Something (perhaps a remaining part of the hypnosis) told her that the dart-bearer was Asasfa[r], priest of an ultraplanetary sect. She leaped from the pedestal and stabbed him deeply in the side. Almost simultaneously, in his convulsive struggles, he scratched her breast with the dart-point before he dropped.

Jon and Mildred both underwent a strange hallucination, identical in all details, which they could never afterward forget. They had the sense of falling immeasurably, plunging through uncharted depths and dimensions, to hang insecurely poised on the verge of an alien hell, from which pointed flames and obscenely writhing monsters, dragon-like creatures with several heads and bodies, reached upward around their feet and sometimes over towered them, breathing a fetid stench in their faces. Not the least horror was the figure of Rasasfa standing close at hand, and thrusting with his dart at the monsters. And they, in turn, seemed to assail him with a special menace and venom, looming far up and lengthening fantastically into the skyless vault. He paid no attention to the humans, apparently oblivious of their presence either as foes or allies.

At last the lurid glow, like ashen embers, dimmed in the depths. The figures grew vaporous, and broke up like wind-blown clouds, trailing and mingling and finally dissolving. Jon and Mildred stood alone on the precipice, which tottered and fell apart.

They awoke in the nave. The crowd had vanished. The reptile had dropped his dart but was still writhing. Pierced in a vital part by Mildred's knife, he was dying very slowly, as snakes die.

They found their way from the edifice, meeting no one. Jon had picked up the dart and carried it. The sun had abandoned the skies, leaving a multitude of stars. Using a small pocket-compass, of which his captors had not deprived him, they left the city. The place lay entirely dark and silent, as

if deserted by its inhabitants; and quitting its narrow, tortuous streets, they returned toward the mountains. They surmised that the slaying of Asasfa had wrought profound terror. Doubtless the people had believed him a supernatural or immortal being.

For two days they traveled across a semi-desert land. The sun leaned over them, warm until evening. They followed the compass toward a magnetic pole in what they liked to believe was the north. The air was very cold at night, and they slept a few hours in each other's arms. Fearing pursuit, they peered often backward at the city, which sank gradually on the horizon. Presently they found the tracks of the reptile people going cityward from the mountains, deeply printed because of the weight of the unconscious humans whom they carried. No doubt there were other cities in this world; but Jon and Mildred were glad to forgo any curiosity concerning them. Their one experience had been enough for several lifetimes.

Late in the second afternoon the footsteps led them to the hollow in which Jon had been digging when they were captured by the falling net. Their tools and sacks and thermos lay where they had left them, their captors plainly thinking these appurtenances of no particular account.

The coffee was still warm in the thermos. They gulped some of it down eagerly. Then Jon resumed his digging while Mildred remained on the ridge watching the remote city, which seemed to waver and flicker like a mirage. Jon had filled one of the sacks with crude carborundum and was beginning to uncover the zeronium when he heard Mildred cry out in warning. Hastily he climbed the ridge beside her, taking with him the dart-weapon and a pistol snatched from his pack.

A half-dozen of the reptile-men, climbing noiselessly, were hard upon them. All were armed with darts. They paused when Jon brandished Rasasfa's weapon, as if realizing its weird powers and superiority to their

own. Then they resumed their advance. Jon dropped two of them with the pistol, which was a sort of flame-thrower, and short-ranged. The others fell back and concealed themselves behind boulders. They had estimated closely the range of the flame-thrower.

“Take over while I get the zeronium,” Jon instructed, giving Mildred the pistol. She obeyed while Jon finished laying bare the needed element and partly filled the other sack. He attached the tools and sacks to his shoulder-band, and telling Mildred to follow, began to escalate toward the space-flier.

It was a close race. He heard the snap and hiss of the pistol and Mildred’s cry of triumph as at least one of their pursuers fell back. Then he was climbing the flier’s ladder and pushing his loads through the manhole. Hanging at one side, he made sure that Mildred preceded him, snatching the pistol from her hand as she went past. One of the reptile-men was starting to climb the ladder, but fell into the ravine when Jon fired. Jon went through the manhole and made fast the outer and inner lids.

They worked on their repairs for much of the night, hearing the baffled cries of the reptiles and the futile crash of their weapons against the hull and windows.

The furnaces had done their fusing, and the rod was welded and left to cool.

At earliest morning they took off and regained the outer skies.

THE END.

The Short Stories



Smith spent most of his life in the small town of Auburn, California, living in a cabin built by his parents.

List of Short Stories in Chronological Order



The Voyage of King Euvoran
The Maze of the Enchanter
The Double Shadow
A Night in Malnéant
The Devotee of Evil
The Willow Landscape
The End of the Story
A Rendezvous in Averaigne
The City of the Singing Flame (original version)
The City of the Singing Flame (later version)
The Uncharted Isle
The Second Interment
The Chain of Aforgomon
The Dark Eidolon
The Last Hieroglyph
Sadastor
The Death of Ilalotha
The Return of the Sorcerer
The Testament of Athammaus
The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqquan
Ubbo-Sathla
The Monster of the Prophecy
The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis
From the Crypts of Memory

The Shadows
The Empire of the Necromancers
The Isle of the Torturers
Necromancy in Naat
Xeethra
The Holiness of Azédarac
The Beast of Averoigne
The Letter from Mohaun Los
Flight into Super-Time
The Light from Beyond
The Hunters from Beyond
The Treader of the Dust
The Last Incantation
A Voyage to Sfanomoë
The Death of Malygris
The Tale of Satampira Zeiros
The Door to Saturn
The Seven Geases
The Coming of the White Worm
The Maze of Maâl Dweb
The Flower-Women
The Demon of the Flower
The Plutonian Drug
The Planet of the Dead
The Gorgon
Genius Loci
The Ninth Skeleton
The Phantoms of the Fire

The Eternal World
Vulthoom
A Star-Change
The Primal City
The Disinterment of Venus
The Colossus of Ylourgne
The Satyr
The Garden of Adompha
The Charnel God
The Black Abbot of Puthuum
The Weaver in the Vault
The Nameless Offspring
The Witchcraft of Ulua
The Epiphany of Death
A Vintage from Atlantis
The Abominations of Yondo
The White Sybil
The Ice-Demon
The Master of the Crabs
The Enchantress of Sylaire
The Dweller in the Gulf
The Dark Age
The Third Episode of Vathek
Chinoiserie
The Mirror in the Hall of Ebony
The Passing of Aphrodite
The Great God Awto
The Immortals of Mercury

The Maker of Gargoyles
Master of the Asteroid
Morthylla
Mother of Toads
Murder in the Fourth Dimension
The Root of Ampoi
Schizoid Creator
The Seed from the Sepulchre
Seedling of Mars
Symposium of the Gorgon
The Theft of the Thirty-Nine Girdles
The Tomb-Spawn
Marooned in Andromeda
The Amazing Planet
A Captivity in Serpens
An Adventure in Futurity
The Immeasurable Horror
The Invisible City
The Dimension of Chance
The Metamorphosis of Earth
Phoenix
The Necromantic Tale
The Venus of Azombeii
The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake
The Supernumerary Corpse
The Mandrakes
Thirteen Phantasms
An Offering to the Moon

The Malay Krise
The Ghost of Mohammed Din
The Mahout
The Raja and the Tiger
Something New
The Justice of the Elephant
The Kiss of Zoraida
The Tale of Sir John Maundeville
The Kingdom of the Worm
The Ghoul
Told in the Desert
The Desolation of Soom
The Abomination of Desolation
The Muse of Atlantis
The Flirt
A Copy of Burns
Quest of the Gazolba
Monsters in the Night
The House of Haon-Dor (A Fragment)
A Good Embalmer
Double Cosmos
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Nemesis of the Unfinished
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The Poetry Collections



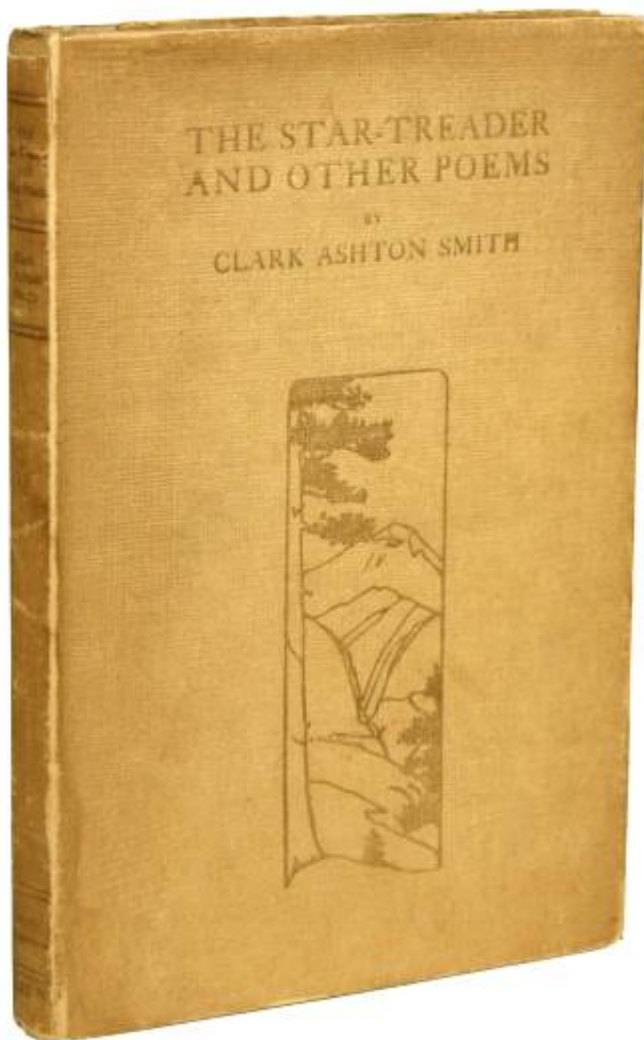
Smith's cabin home at Boulder Ridge, Auburn

The Star-Treader and Other Poems (1912)



Poetry was the genre that primarily motivated Smith as a young man and he confined his efforts to poetry for more than a decade, after an early period of selling short fiction to various pulp magazines. He was a keen member of the Auburn Monday Night Club, where he made the acquaintance of the San Francisco poet George Sterling, who had read several of his poems. On a month-long visit to Sterling in Carmel, California, Smith was introduced to the poetry of Baudelaire.

In time, he became Sterling's protégé and was inspired to publish his first volume of poems, *The Star-Treader and Other Poems* (1912), at the age of nineteen. Smith went on to receive international acclaim for the collection, which was received favorably by American critics, one of whom named Smith "the Keats of the Pacific". Smith briefly moved among a circle that included Ambrose Bierce and Jack London, but his early fame was not to last.



The first edition

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THE STAR-TREADER
AND OTHER POEMS

BY
CLARK ASHTON SMITH



The first edition's title page



George Sterling, Smith's mentor and friend, c. 1905

TO
MY MOTHER



NERO



This Rome, that was the toil of many men,
The consummation of laborious years —
Fulfilment's crown to visions of the dead,
And image of the wide desire of kings —
Is made my darkling dream's effulgency,
Fuel of vision, brief embodiment
Of wandering will, and wastage of the strong
Fierce ecstasy of one tremendous hour,
When ages piled on ages were a flame
To all the years behind, and years to be.

Yet any sunset were as much as this,
Save for the music forced by hands of fire
From out the hard strait silences which bind
Dull Matter's tongueless mouth — a music pierced
With the tense voice of Life, more quick to cry
Its agony — and save that I believed
The radiance redder for the blood of men.
Destruction hastens and intensifies
The process that is Beauty, manifests
Ranges of form unknown before, and gives
Motion and voice and hue where otherwise
Bleak inexpressiveness had leveled all.

If one create, there is the lengthy toil;
The laboured years and days league tow'rd an end

Less than the measure of desire, mayhap,
After the sure consuming of all strength,
And strain of faculties that elsewhere
Were loosed upon enjoyment; and at last
Remains to one capacity nor power
For pleasure in the thing that he hath made.
But on destruction hangs but little use
Of time or faculty, but all is turned
To the one purpose, unobstructed, pure,
Of sensuous rapture and observant joy;
And from the intensities of death and ruin,
One draws a heightened and completer life,
And both extends and vindicates himself.

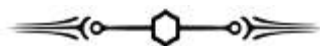
I would I were a god, with all the scope
Of attributes that are the essential core
Of godhead, and its visibility.
I am but emperor, and hold awhile
The power to hasten Death upon his way,
And cry a halt to worn and lagging Life
For others, but for mine own self may not
Delay the one, nor bid the other speed.
There have been many kings, and they are dead,
And have no power in death save what the wind
Confers upon their blown and brainless dust
To vex the eyeballs of posterity.
But were I god, I would be overlord
Of many kings, and were as breath to guide
Their dust of destiny. And were I god,

Exempt from this mortality which clogs
Perception, and clear exercise of will,
What rapture it would be, if but to watch
Destruction crouching at the back of Time,
The tongueless dooms which dog the travelling suns;
The vampire Silence at the breast of worlds,
Fire without light that gnaws the base of things,
And Lethe's mounting tide, that rots the stone
Of fundamental spheres. This were enough
Till such time as the dazzled wings of will
Came up with power's accession, scarcely felt
For very suddenness. Then would I urge
The strong contention and conflicting might
Of chaos and creation, matching them,
Those immemorial powers inimical,
And all their stars and gulfs subservient —
Dynasts of Time, and anarchs of the dark —
In closer war reverseless; and would set
New discord at the universal core,
A Samson-principle to bring it down
In one magnificence of ruin. Yea,
The monster Chaos were mine unleashed hound,
And all my power Destruction's own right arm!

I would exult to mark the smouldering stars
Renew beneath my breath their elder fire,
And feed upon themselves to nothingness.
The might of suns, slow-paced with swinging weight
Of myriad worlds, were made at my desire

One long rapidity of roaring light,
Through which the voice of Life were audible,
And singing of the immemorial dead
Whose dust is loosened into vaporous wings
With soaring wrack of systems ruinous.
And were I weary of the glare of these,
I would tear out the eyes of light, and stand
Above a chaos of extinguished suns,
That crowd, and grind, and shiver thunderously,
Lending vast voice and motion, but no ray
To the stretched silence of the blinded gulfs.
Thus would I give my godhead space and speech
For its assertion, and thus pleasure it,
Hastening the feet of Time with casts of worlds
Like careless pebbles, or with shattered suns
Brightening the aspect of Eternity.

CHANT TO SIRIUS



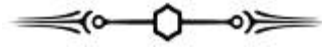
What nights retard thee, O Sirius!
Thy light is as a spear,
And thou penetratest them
As a warrior that stabbeth his foe
Even to the center of his life.
Thy rays reach farther than the gulfs;
They form a bridge thereover,
That shall endure till the links of the universe
Are unfastened, and drop apart,
And all the gulfs are one,
Dissevered by suns no longer.

How strong art thou in thy place!
Thou stridest thine orbit,
And the darkness shakes beneath thee,
As a road that is trodden by an army.
Thou art a god,
In thy temple that is hollowed with light
In the night of infinitude,
And whose floor is the lower void;
Thy worlds are as priests and ministers therein.
Thou furrowest space,
Even as an husbandman,
And sowest it with alien seed;
It beareth alien fruits,

And these are thy testimony,
Even as the crops of his fields
Are the testimony of an husbandman.

THE STAR-TREADER

I



A voice cried to me in a dawn of dreams,
Saying, "Make haste: the webs of death and birth
Are brushed away, and all the threads of earth
Wear to the breaking; spaceward gleams
Thine ancient pathway of the suns,
Whose flame is part of thee;
And deeps outreach immutably
Whose largeness runs
Through all thy spirit's mystery.
Go forth, and tread unharmed the blaze
Of stars where through thou camest in old days;
Pierce without fear each vast
Whose hugeness crushed thee not within the past.
A hand strikes off the chains of Time,
A hand swings back the door of years;
Now fall earth's bonds of gladness and of tears,
And opens the strait dream to space sublime."

II

Who rides a dream, what hand shall stay!
What eye shall note or measure mete
His passage on a purpose fleet,
The thread and weaving of his way!

It caught me from the clasping world,
And swept beyond the brink of Sense,
My soul was flung, and poised, and whirled,
Like to a planet chained and hurled
With solar lightning strong and tense.
Swift as communicated rays
That leap from severed suns a gloom
Within whose waste no suns illumine,
The wingèd dream fulfilled its ways.
Through years reversed and lit again
I followed that unending chain
Wherein the suns are links of light;
Retraced through lineal, ordered spheres
The twisting of the threads of years
In weavings wrought of noon and night;
Through stars and deeps I watched the dream unroll,
Those folds that form the raiment of the soul.

III

Enkindling dawns of memory,
Each sun had radiance to relume
A sealed, disused, and darkened room
Within the soul's immensity.
Their alien ciphers shown and lit,
I understood what each had writ
Upon my spirit's scroll;
Again I wore mine ancient lives,

And knew the freedom and the gyves
That formed and marked my soul.

IV

I delved in each forgotten mind,
The units that had builded me,
Whose deepnesses before were blind
And formless as infinity —
Knowing again each former world —
From planet unto planet whirled
Through gulfs that mightily divide
Like to an intervital sleep.
One world I found, where souls abide
Like winds that rest upon a rose;
Thereto they creep
To loose all burden of old woes.
And one I knew, where warp of pain
Is woven in the soul's attire;
And one, where with new loveliness
Is strengthened Beauty's olden chain —
Soft as a sound, and keen as fire —
In light no darkness may depress.

V

Where no terrestrial dreams had trod
My vision entered undismayed,
And Life her hidden realms displayed
To me as to a curious god.

Where colored suns of systems triplicate
Bestow on planets weird, ineffable,
Green light that orbs them like an outer sea,
And large auroral noons that alternate
With skies like sunset held without abate,
Life's touch renewed incomprehensibly
The strains of mirth and grief's harmonious spell.
Dead passions like to stars relit
Shone in the gloom of ways forgot;
Where crownless gods in darkness sit
The day was full on altars hot.
I heard — once more a part of it —
The central music of the Pleiades,
And to Alcyone my soul
Swayed with the stars that own her song's control.
Unchallenged, glad I trod, a revenant
In worlds Edenic longly lost;
Or walked in spheres that sing to these,
O'er space no light has crossed,
Diverse as Hell's mad antiphone uptossed
To Heaven's angelic chant.

VI

What vasts the dream went out to find!
I seemed beyond the world's recall
In gulfs where darkness is a wall
To render strong Antares blind!
In unimagined spheres I found

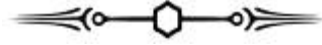
The sequence of my being's round —
Some life where firstling meed of Song,
The strange imperishable leaf,
Was placed on brows that starry Grief
Had crowned, and Pain anointed long;
Some avatar where Love
Sang like the last great star at morn
Ere Death filled all its sky;
Some life in fresher years unworn
Upon a world whereof
Peace was a robe like to the calms that lie
On pools aglow with latter spring:
There Life's pellucid surface took
Clear image of all things, nor shook
Till touch of Death's obscuring wing;
Some earlier awakening
In pristine years, when giant strife
Of forces darkly whirled
First forged the thing called Life —
Hot from the furnace of the suns —
Upon the anvil of a world.

VII

Thus knew I those anterior ones
Whose lives in mine were blent;
Till, lo! my dream, that held a night
Where Rigel sends no word of might,
Was emptied of the trodden stars,

And dwindled to the sun's extent —
The brain's familiar prison-bars,
And raiment of the sorrow and the mirth
Wrought by the shuttles intricate of earth.

THE MORNING POOL



All night the pool held mysteries,
Vague depths of night that lay in dream,
Where phantoms of the pale-white stars
Wandered, with darkness-tangled gleam.

And now it holds the limpid light
And shadeless azure of the skies,
Wherein, like some enclaspèd gem,
The morning's golden glamour lies.

THE NIGHT FOREST



Incumbent seemingly
On the jagged points of peaks
That end the visible west,
The rounded moon yet floods
The valleys hitherward
With fall of torrential light,
Ere from the overmost
Aggressive mountain-cusp,
She slip to the lower dark.
But here, on an eastward slope
Pointed and thick with its pine,
The forest scarcely remembers
Her light that is gone as a vision
Or ecstasy too poignant
And perilous for duration.
Withdrawn in what darker web
Or dimension of dream I know not,
In silence pre-occupied
And solemnest rectitude
The pines uprear, and no sigh
For the rapture of moonlight past,
Comes from their bosom of boughs.
Far in their secrecy
I stand, and the burden of dusk
Dull, but at times made keen

With tingle of fragrances,
Falls on me as a veil
Between my soul and the world.

What veil of trance, O pines,
Divides you from my soul,
That I feel but enter not
Your distances of dream?
Ah! strange, imperative sense
Of world-deep mystery
That shakes from out your boughs —
A fragrance yet more keen,
Pressing upon the mind.

The wind shall question you
Of the dream I may not gain,
And all its sombreness
And depth immeasurable,
Shall tremble away in sound
Of speech not understood
That my heart must break to hear.

THE MAD WIND



What hast thou seen, O wind,
Of beauty or of terror
Surpassing, denied to us,
That with precipitate wings,
Mad and ecstatical,
Thou spurnest the hollows and trees
That offer thee refuge of peace,
And findest within the sky
No safety nor respite
From the memory of thy vision?

SONG TO OBLIVION



Art thou more fair
For all the beauty gathered up in thee,
As gold and gems within some lightless sea?
For light of flowers, and bloom of tinted air,
Art thou more fair?

Art thou more strong
For powers that turn to thee as unto sleep?
For world and star that find thy ways more deep
Than light may tread, too wearisome for song
Art thou more strong?

Nay! thou art bare
For power and beauty on thine impotence
Bestowed by fruitful Time's magnificence;
For fruit of all things strong, and bloom of fair,
Thou still art bare.

MEDUSA



As drear and barren as the glooms of Death,
It lies, a windless land of livid dawns,
Nude to a desolate firmament, with hills
That seem the fleshless earth's outjutting ribs,
And plains whose face is crossed and rivelled deep
With gullies twisting like a serpent's track.
The leprous touch of Death is on its stones,
Where for his token visible, the Head
Is throned upon a heap of monstrous rocks,
Grotesque in everlasting ugliness,
Within a hill-ravine, that splits athwart
Like some old, hideous and unhealing scar.
Her lethal beauty crowned with twining snakes
That mingle with her hair, the Gorgon reigns.
Her eyes are clouds wherein Death's lightnings lurk,
Yet, even as men that seek the glance of Life,
The gazers come, where, coiled and serpent-swift,
Those levins wait. As 'round an altar-base
Her victims lie, distorted, blackened forms
Of postured horror smitten into stone, —
Time caught in meshes of Eternity —
Drawn back from dust and ruin of the years,
And given to all the future of the world.
The land is claimed of Death: the daylight comes
Half-strangled in the changing webs of cloud

That unseen spiders of bewildered winds
Weave and unweave across the lurid sun
In upper air. Below, no zephyr comes
To break with life the circling spell of death.
Long vapor-serpents twist about the moon,
And in the windy murkness of the sky,
The guttering stars are wild as candle-flames
That near the socket.

Thus the land shall be,
And Death shall wait, throned in Medusa's eyes.
Till, in the irremeable webs of night
The sun is snared, and the corroded moon
A dust upon the gulfs, and all the stars
Rotted and fall'n like rivets from the sky,
Letting the darkness down upon all things.

ODE TO THE ABYSS



O many-gulfed, unalterable one,
Whose deep sustains
Far-drifting world and sun,
Thou wast ere ever star put out on thee;
And thou shalt be
When never world remains;
When all the suns' triumphant strength and pride
Is sunk in voidness absolute,
And their majestic music wide
In vaster silence rendered mute.
And though God's will were night to dusk the blue,
And law to cancel and disperse
The tangled tissues of the universe,
And mould the suns anew,
His might were impotent to conquer thee,
O invisible infinity!
Thy darks subdue
All light that treads thee down a space,
Exulting o'er thy deeps.
The cycles die, and lo! thy darkness reaps
The flame of mightiest stars;
In aeon-implicating wars
Thou tearest planets from their place;
Worlds granite-spined
To thine erodents yield

Their treasures centrally confined
In crypts by continental pillars sealed.
What suns and worlds have been thy prey
Through unhorizoned stretches of the Past!
What spheres that now essay
Time's undimensioned vast,
Shall plunge forgotten to thy gloom at length,
With life that cried its query of the Night
To ears with silence filled!
What worlds unborn shall dare thy strength,
Girt by a sun's unwearied might,
And dip to darkness when the sun is stilled!

O incontestable Abyss,
What light in thine embrace of darkness sleeps —
What blaze of a sidereal multitude
No peopled world is left to miss!
What motion is at rest within thy deeps —
What gyres of planets long become thy food —
Worlds unconstrainable,
That plunged therein to peace,
Like tempest-worn and crew-forsaken ships;
And suns that fell
To huge and ultimate eclipse,
And lasting gyre-release!
What sound thy gulfs of silence hold!
Stupendous thunder of the meeting stars,
And crash of orbits that diverged,
With Life's thin song are merged;

Thy quietudes enfold
Paeon and threnody as one,
And battle-blare of unremembered wars
With festal songs
Sung in the Romes of ruined spheres,
And music that belongs
To younger, undiscoverable years
With words of yesterday.
Ah, who may stay
Thy soundless world-devouring tide?
O thou whose hands pluck out the light of stars,
Are worlds grown but as fruit for thee?
May no sufficient bars,
Nor marks inveterate abide
To baffle thy persistency?
Still and unstriving now,
What plottest thou,
Within thy universe-ulterior deeps,
Dark as the final lull of suns?
What new advancement of the night
On citadels of stars around whose might
Thy slow encroachment runs,
And crouching silence, thunder-potent, sleeps?

THE SOUL OF THE SEA

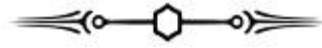


A wind comes in from the sea,
And rolls through the hollow dark
Like loud, tempestuous waters.
As the swift recurrent tide,
It pours adown the sky,
And rears at the cliffs of night
Uppiled against the vast.

Like the soul of the sea —
Hungry, unsatisfied
With ravin of shores and of ships —
Come forth on the land to seek
New prey of tideless coasts,
It raves, made hoarse with desire,
And the sounds of the night are dumb
With the sound of its passing.

THE BUTTERFLY

I



O wonderful and wingèd flow'r,
That hoverest in the garden-close,
Finding in mazes of the rose,
The beauty of a Summer hour!

O symbol of Impermanence,
Thou art a word of Beauty's tongue,
A word that in her song is sung,
Appealing to the inner sense!

Of that great mystic harmony,
All lovely things are notes and words —
The trees, the flow'rs, the songful birds,
The flame-white stars, the surging sea,

The aureate light of sudden dawn,
The sunset's crimson afterglow,
The summer clouds, the dazzling snow,
The brooks, the moonlight chaste and wan.

Lacking (who knows?) a cloud, a tree,
A streamlet's purl, the ocean's roar
From Nature's multitudinous store —
Imperfect were the melody!

II

O Beauty, why so sad my heart?
Why stirs in me a nameless pain
Which seems like some remembered strain,
As on this product of thine art

Enraptured, marvelling I gaze,
And note how airily 'tis wrought —
A wingèd dream, a bodied thought,
The spirit of the summer days?

Thy beauty opes, O Butterfly,
The doors of being, with subtle sense
Of Beauty's frail impermanence,
And grief of knowing it must die.

Again I seem to know the tears
Of other lives, the woe and pain
Of days that died; resurgent wane
The moons of countless bygone years.

III

On other worlds, on other stars,
To us but tiny points of light,
Or lost in distances of night
Beyond our system's farthest bars,

A priest to Beauty's service sworn,
I sought and served her all my days,

With music and with hymns of praise.
In sunset and the fires of morn,

With thrilling heart her form I knew,
And in the stars she whitely gleamed,
And all the face of Nature seemed
Expression of her shape and hue.

I grieved to watch the summers pass
With all their gorgeous shows of bloom,
And sterner autumn months assume
Their realm with withered leaves and grass.

Mine was the grief of Change and Death,
Of fair things gone beyond recall,
The paling light of dawns, and all
The flowers' vanished hues and breath.

IV

From out the web of former lives,
The ancient catenated chain
Of joy and sorrow, loss and gain,
One certain truth my heart derives: —

Though Beauty passes, this I know,
From Change and Death, this verity:
Her spirit lives eternally —
'Tis but her forms that come and go.

V

Lo! I am Beauty's constant thrall,
Must ever on her voice await,
And follow through the maze of Fate
Her luring, strange and mystical.

Obedient to her summonings,
Forever must my soul aspire,
And seek, on wings of lyric fire,
To penetrate the Heart of Things,

Wherein she sits, augustly throned,
In loveliness that renders dumb —
The Essence and the final Sum —
With peril and with wonder zoned

What though I fail, my duller sense
Baffled as by a wall of stone?
The high desire, the search alone
Are their own prize and recompense.

THE PRICE



Behind each thing a shadow lies;
Beauty hath e'er its cost:
Within the moonlight-flooded skies
How many stars are lost!

THE MYSTIC MEANING



Alas! that we are deaf and blind
To meanings all about us hid!
What secrets lurk the woods amid?
What prophecies are on the wind?

What tidings do the billows bring
And cry in vain upon the strand?
If we might only understand
The brooklet's cryptic murmuring!

The tongues of earth and air are strange.
And yet (who knows?) one little word
Learned from the language of the bird
Might make us lords of Fate and Change!

ODE TO MUSIC



O woven fabric and bright web of sound,
Whose threads are magical,
And with swift weaving thrall
And hold the spirit bound!
We may not know whence thy strange sorceries fall —
Whether they be Earth's voices wild and strong,
Her high and perfect song.
Or broken dreams of higher worlds unfound.
For, lo, thou art as dreams.
And to thy realm all hidden things belong —
All fugitive and evanescent gleams
The soul hath vainly sought;
All mystic immanence;
All visions of ungrasped magnificence,
And great ideals pinnacled in thought;
All paths with marvel fraught
That lead to lands obscure:
For, lo, upon thy road of sound we pass,
Seeking thy magic lure,
To vales mist-implicated and unsure,
Where all seems strange as visions in a glass;
And wonder-haunted hills,
Where Beauty is an echo and a dream
In sighing pines, and rills
Clouded and deep with imaged tree and sky;

And where bright rivers gleam
Past cities towering high,
Each wonderful as some cloud-fantasy.

Thou loosenest the bondage of the years,
Making the spirit free
Of all sublunar joys and fears.
Who mounts on thine imperious wings shall see
The ways of life as threads of day and night;
Serene above their change,
His eyes shall know but far transcendent things,
His ears shall hark but voices free and strange;
Vast seas of outer light
Shall beat upon his sight,
Eternal winds shall touch him with their wings;
His heart shall thrill
To larger, purer joy, and grief more deep
Than earth may know;
And e'en as dews of morning fill
The opened flower, into his soul shall flow
High melodies, like tears that angels weep.
Then shall he penetrate
The veils and outer barriers of sound,
And near the soul of melody,
Where, rapt in aural splendors ultimate,
His soul shall see
The marvel and the glory that surround
Eternal Beauty's shrine;
And catch afar the glint divine

Of her moon-colored robe, or haply hear,
With world-oblivious ear,
Some echo of her voice's mystery.

Thou hast Love's power to find
The soul's most secret chords, that else were still,
And stir'st them till they thrill
Disclosed to least, faint movements of thy wind.
Thine aural sorcery
O'erwhelms the heart as sunset storms the sight,
For thou art Beauty bodied forth in sound —
Her colors bright
And diverse forms expressed in harmony:
Within thy bound,
The flare of morning is become a song,
And tree and flower a music sweet and long.
And in thy speech
The power and majesty that swing
Planet and sun, and each
Dim atom of the system manifest,
Become articulate, expressed
Like ocean in the brooklet's whispering.
Beyond the woof of finite things,
Thy threads of wonder deep-entangled lie —
Time's intertexturings
Within Eternity —
With Song, mayhap, to be his memories;
For Beauty borders nigh
The ultimate, eternal Verities.

THE LAST NIGHT



I dreamed a dream: I stood upon a height,
A mountain's utmost eminence of snow,
Whence I beheld the plain outstretched below
To a far sea-horizon, dim and white.
Beneath the sun's expiring, ghastly light,
The dead world lay, phantasmally aglow;
Its last fear-weighted voice, a wind, came low;
The distant sea lay hushed, as with affright.

I watched, and lo! the pale and flickering sun,
In agony and fierce despair, flamed high,
And shadow-slain, went out upon the gloom.
Then Night, that grim, gigantic struggle won,
Impended for a breath on wings of doom,
And through the air fell like a falling sky.

ODE ON IMAGINATION



Imagination's eyes
Outreach and distance far
The vision of the greatest star
That measures instantaneously —
Enisled therein as in a sea —
Its cincture of the system-laden skies.
Abysses closed about with night
A tribute yield
To her retardless sight;
And Matter's gates disclose the candent ores
Rock-held in furnaces of planet-cores.
She penetrates the sun's transplendent shield,
And through the obstruction of his vestment dire,
Pierces the centermost sublimity
Of his terrific heart, whose gurge of fire
Heaves upward like a monstrous sea,
And inly riven by Titanic throes,
Fills all his frame with outward cataract
Of separate and immingling torrent streams.
Her eyes exact
From the Moon-Sphinx that wanes and grows
In wastes celestial, alien dreams
Brought down on wings of fleetest beams.
Adown the clefts of under-space
She rides, her steed a falling star,

To seek, where void and vagueness are,
Some mark or certainty of place.
Upon their heavenly precipice
The gathered suns shrink back aghast
From that interminate abyss,
And threat of sightless anarchs vast.

She stands endued
With supermundane crown, and vestitures
Of emperies that include
All under-worlds and over-worlds of dream —
Kingdoms o'ercast, and eminent heights extreme
Where moon-transcending light endures.
She wanders in fantastic lands, where grow
In scarce-discernèd fields and closes blind,
Vague blossoms stirred by wings of eidolons;
Or roves in forests where all sound is low:
Each voice that shuns
The noisy day, and enters there to find
Twilight that naught exalts nor grieves,
Is quickly tuned to the susurrous leaves.

Upon some supersensual eminence
She hears the fragments of a thunder loud,
Where lightnings of ulterior Truth intense
Flame through the walls of hollow cloud.
But these she may not wholly grasp
With incomplete terrestrial clasp.
Her eyes inevitably see,

‘Neath rounds and changes of exterior things,
The movements of Essentiality —
Of ageless principles — that alter not
To temporal alterings —
Unswerved by shattered worlds upbuilt once more.
And stars no longer hot;
Or broken constellations strewn
Like coals about the heavenly floor,
And rush of night upon the noon
Of their lost worlds, unsphered restorelessly
In icy deserts of the sky.
From the beginning of the spheres,
When systems nebulous out-thrown
Drove back the brinks
Of nullity with limitary marks,
Till end of suns, and sunless death of years,
To her are known
The unevident inseparable links
That bind all deeps, all suns, all days and darks.

THE WIND AND THE MOON



Oh, list to the wind of the night, oh, hark,
How it shrieks as it goes on its hurrying quest!
Forever its voice is a voice of the dark,
Forever its voice is a voice of unrest.
Oh, list to the pines as they shiver and sway
‘Neath the ceaseless beat of its myriad wings —
How they moan and they sob like living things
That cry in the darkness for light and day!
Now bend they low as the wind mounts higher,
And its eerie voice comes piercingly,
Like the plaint of humanity’s misery,
And its burden of vain desire.
Now to a sad, tense whisper it fails,
Then wildly and madly it raves and it wails.

Oh, the night is filled with its sob and its shriek,
Its weird and its restless, yearning cry,
As it races adown the darkened sky,
With scurry of broken clouds that seek,
Borne on the wings of the hastening wind,
A place of rest that they never can find.
And around the face of the moon they cling,
Its fugitive face to veil they aspire;
But ever and ever it peereth out,
Rending the cloud-ranks that hem it about;

And it seemeth a lost and phantom thing,
Like a phantom of dead desire.

LAMENT OF THE STARS



One tone is mute within the starry singing,
The unison fulfilled, complete before;
One chord within the music sounds no more,
And from the stir of flames forever winging
The pinions of our sister, motionless
In pits of indefinable duress,
Are fallen beyond all recovery
By exultation of the flying dance,
Or rhythms holding as with sleep or trance
The maze of stars that only death may free —
Flung through the void's expanse.

In gulfs depressed nor in the gulfs exalted
Shall shade nor lightening of her flame be found;
In space that litten orbits gird around,
Nor in the bottomless abyss unvaulted
Of unenvironed, all-outlying night.
Allotted gyre nor lawless comet-flight
Shall find, and with its venturous ray return
From gloom of undiscoverable scope,
One ray of her to gladden into hope
The doubtful eyes denied that truthward yearn,
The faltering feet that grope.

Beyond restrainless boundary-nights surpassing
All luminous horizons limited,

The substance and the light of her have fed
Ruin and silence of the night's amassing:
Abandoned worlds forever morningless;
Suns without worlds, in frory beamlessness
Girt for the longer gyre funereal;
Inviolable silence, earless, unawaking
That once was sound, and level calm unbreaking
Where motion's many ways in oneness fall
Of sleep beyond forsaking.

Circled with limitation unexceeded
Our eyes behold exterior mysteries
And gods unascertainable as these —
Shadows and shapes irresolubly heeded;
Phantoms that tower, and substance scarcely known.
Our sister knows all mysteries one alone,
One shape, one shadow, crowding out the skies;
Whose eyeless head and lipless face debar
All others nameless or familiar,
Filling with night all former lips and eyes
Of god, and ghost, and star:

For her all shapes have fed the shape of night;
All darker forms, and dubious forms, or pallid,
Are met and reconciled where none is valid.
But unto us solution nor respite
Of mystery's multiform incessancy
From unexplored or system-trodden sky
Shall come; but as a load importunate,

Enigma past and mystery foreseen
Weigh mightily upon us, and between
Our sorrow deepens, and our songs abate
In cadences of threne.

A gloom that gathers silence looms more closely,
And quiet centering darkness at its heart;
But from the certitude of night depart
Uncertain god nor eidolon less ghostly;
But stronger grown with strength obtained from light
That failed, and power lent by the stronger night,
Perplex us with new mystery, and doubt
If these our flames, that deathward toss and fall
Be festal lights or lights funereal
For mightier gods within the gulfs without,
Phantoms more cryptical.

New shadows from the wings of Time unfolding
Across the depth and eminence of years,
Fall deeper with the broadening gloom of fears.
Prophetic-eyed, with planet-hosts beholding
The night take form upon the face of suns,
We see (thus grief's vaticination runs —
Presageful sorrow for our sister slain)
A night wherein all sorrow shall be past,
One with night's single mystery at last;
Nor vocal sun nor singing world remain
As Time's elegiast.

THE MAZE OF SLEEP



Sleep is a pathless labyrinth,
Dark to the gaze of moons and suns,
Through which the colored clue of dreams,
A gossamer thread, obscurely runs.

THE WINDS



To me the winds that die and start,
And strive in wars that never cease,
Are dearer than the level peace
That lies unstirred at summer's heart;

More dear to me the shadowed wold,
Where, with report of tempest rife,
The air intensifies with life,
Than quiet fields of summer's gold.

I am the winds' admitted friend:
They seal our linked fellowships
With speech of warm or icy lips,
With touch of west and east that blend.

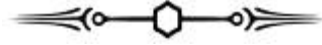
And when my spirit listless stands,
With folded wings that do not live,
Their own assuageless wings they give
To lift her from the stirless lands.

* * * * *

Within the place unmanifest
Where central Truth is immanent,
Lies there a vast, entire content
Of sound and movement one in rest?

I know not this. Yet in my heart,
I feel that where all truths concur,
The shrine is peaceless with the stir
Of winds that enter and depart.

THE MASQUE OF FORSAKEN GODS



SCENE: *A MOONLIT glade on a summer midnight*

THE POET



What consummation of the toiling moon
O'ercomes the midnight blue with violet,
Wherein the stars turn grey! The summer's green,
Edgèd and strong by day, is dull and faint
Beneath the moon's all-dominating mood,
That in this absence of the impassioned sun,
Sways to a sleep of sound and calm of color
The live and vivid aspect of the world —
Subdued as with the great expectancy
Which blurs beginning features of a dream,
Things and events lost 'neath an omening
Of central and oppressive bulk to come.
Here were the theatre of a miracle,
If such, within a world long alienate
From its first dreams, and shut with skeptic years,
Might now befall.

THE PHILOSOPHER



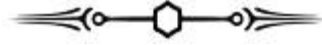
The Huntress rides no more
Across the upturned faces of the stars:
'Tis but the dead shell of a frozen world,
Glittering with desolation. Earth's old gods —
The gods that haunt like dreams each planet's youth —
Are fled from years incredulous, and tired
With penetrating of successive masks,
That give but emptiness they served to hide.
Remains not faith enough to bring them back —
Pan to his wood, Diana to her moon,
And all the visions that made populous
An eager world where Time grows weary now.
Yet Youth, that lives, might for a little claim
The pantheon of dream, on such a night,
When 'neath the growing marvel of the moon
The films of time wear perilously thin,
And thought looks backward to the simpler years,
Till all the vision seems but just beyond.
If one have faith, it may be that he shall
Behold the gods — once only, and no more,
Because of Time's inhospitality,
For which they may not stay.

THE POET



Within the marvel of the light, what flower
Of active wonder from quiescence springs!
Is it a throng of luminous white clouds,
Phantoms of some old storm's death-driven Titans,
That float beneath the moon, and speak with voices
Like the last echoes of a thunder spent?
'Tis the forsaken gods, that win a foothold
About the magic circle which the moon
Draws like some old enchantress round the glade.

THE PHILOSOPHER



I see them not: the vision is addressed
Only to thine acute and eager youth.

JOVE



All heaven and earth were once my throne;
Now I have but the wind alone
For shifting judgment-seat.
The pillared world supported me:
Yet man's old incredulity
Left nothing for my feet.

PAN



Man hath forgotten me:
Yet seems it that my memory
Saddens the wistful voices of the wood;
Within each erst-frequented spot
Echo forgets my music not,
Nor Earth my tread where trampling years have stood.

ARTEMIS



Time hath grown cold
Toward beauty loved of old.
The gods must quake
When dreams and hopes forsake
The heart of man,
And disillusion's ban
More chill than stone,
Rears till the former throne
Of loveliness
Is dark and tenantless.
Now must I weep —
Homeless within the deep
Where once of old
Mine orbèd chariot rolled, —
And mourn in vain
Man's immemorial pain
Uncomforted
Of light and beauty fled.

APOLLO



Time wearied of my song —
A satiate and capricious king
Who for his pleasure bade me sing,
First of his minstrel throng.
Till, cloyed with melody,
His ear grew faint to voice and lyre;
Forgotten then of Time's desire,
His thought was void of me.

APHRODITE



I, born of sound and foam,
Child of the sea and wind,
Was fire upon mankind —
Fuelled with Syria, and with Greece and Rome.
Time fanned me with his breath;
Love found new warmth in me,
And Life its ecstasy,
Till I grew deadly with the wind of death.

A NYMPH



How can the world be still so beautiful
When beauty's self is fled? Tis like the mute
And marble loveliness of some dead girl;
And we that hover here, are as the spirit
Of former voice and motion, and live color
In that which shall not stir nor speak again.

ANOTHER NYMPH



Nay, rather say this lovely, lifeless world
Is but a rigid semblance, counterfeiting
The world which was. Nor have the gods retained
Such power as once informed and rendered vital
The cryptic irresponsiveness of stone, —
That statue which Pygmalion made and loved.

ATÈ



I, who was discord among men,
Alone of all Time's hierarchy
Find that Time hath no need of me,
No lack that I might fill again.

THE POET



Tell me, O gods, are ye forever doomed
To fall and flutter among spacial winds,
Finding release nor foothold anywhere —
Debarred from doors of all the suns, like spirits
Whose names are blotted from the lists of Time,
Though they themselves yet wander undestroyed?

THE GODS TOGETHER



Throneless, discrowned, and impotent,
In man's sad disillusionment,
We passed with Earth's returnless youth,
Who were the semblances of truth,
The veils that hid the vacantness
Infinite, naked, meaningless,
The blank and universal Sphinx
Each world beholds at last — and sinks.
New gods protect awhile the gaze
Of man — each one a veil that stays —
Till the new gods, discredited,
Like mist that melts with noon, are fled —
That power oppressive, limitless,
The tyranny of nothingness.
Our power is dead upon the earth
With the first dews and dawns of Time;
But in the far and younger clime
Of other worlds, it hath re-birth.
Yea, though we find not entrance here —
Astray like feathers on the wind,
To neither earth nor heaven consigned —
Fresh altars in a distant sphere
Are keen with fragrance, bright with fire,
New hearths to warm us from the night,

Till, banished thence, we pass in flight
While all the flames of dream expire.

A SUNSET



As blood from some enormous hurt
The sanguine sunset leapt;
Across it, like a dabbled skirt,
The hurrying tempest swept.

THE CLOUD-ISLANDS



What islands marvellous are these,
That gem the sunset's tides of light —
Opals aglow in saffron seas?
How beautiful they lie, and bright,
Like some new-found Hesperides!

What varied, changing magic hues
Tint gorgeously each shore and hill!
What blazing, vivid golds and blues
Their seaward winding valleys fill!
What amethysts their peaks suffuse!

Close held by curving arms of land
That out within the ocean reach,
I mark a faery city stand,
Set high upon a sloping beach
That burns with fire of shimmering sand.

Of sunset-light is formed each wall;
Each dome a rainbow-bubble seems;
And every spire that towers tall
A ray of golden moonlight gleams;
Of opal-flame is every hall.

Alas! how quickly dims their glow!
What veils their dreamy splendours mar!

Like broken dreams the islands go,
As down from strands of cloud and star,
The sinking tides of daylight flow.

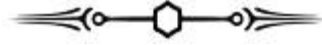
THE SNOW-BLOSSOMS



But yestereve the winter trees
Reared leafless, blackly bare,
Their twigs and branches poignant-marked
Upon the sunset-flare.

White-petaled, opens now the dawn,
And in its pallid glow,
Revealed, each leaf-lorn, barren tree
Stands white with flowers of snow.

THE SUMMER MOON



How is it, O moon, that melting,
Unstintedly, prodigally,
On the peaks' hard majesty,
Till they seem diaphanous
And fluctuant as a veil,
And pouring thy rapturous light
Through pine, and oak, and laurel,
Till the summer-sharpened green,
Softening and tremulous,
Is a lustrous miracle —
How is it that I find,
When I turn again to thee,
That thy lost and wasted light
Is regained in one magic breath?

THE RETURN OF HYPERION



The dungeon-clefts of Tartarus
Are just beyond yon mountain-girdle,
Whose mass is bound around the bulk
Of the dark, unstirred, unmoving East.
Alike on the mountains and the plain,
The night is as some terrific dream,
That closes the soul in a crypt of dread
Apart from touch or sense of earth,
As in the space of Eternity.

What light unseen perturbs the darkness?
Behold! it stirs and fluctuates
Between the mountains and the stars
That are set as guards above the prison
Of the captive Titan-god. I know
That in the deeps beneath, Hyperion
Divides the pillared vault of dark,
And stands a space upon its ruin.
Then light is laid upon the peaks,
As the hand of one who climbs beyond;
And, lo! the Sun! The sentinel stars
Are dead with overpotent flame,
And in their place Hyperion stands.
The night is loosened from the land,
As a dream from the mind of the dreamer.

A great wind blows across the dawn,
Like the wind of the motion of the world.

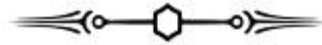
LETHE



I flow beneath the columns that upbear
The world, and all the tracts of heaven and hell;
Foamless I sweep, where sounds nor glimmers tell
My motion nadir-ward; no moment's flare
Gives each to each the shapes that, unaware,
Commingle at my verge, to test the spell
Of waves intense with night, whose deeps compel
One face from pain, and rapture, and despair.

The fruitless earth's denied and cheated sons
Meet here, where fruitful and unfruitful cease.
And when their lords, the mightier, hidden Ones,
Have drained all worlds till being's wine is low,
Shall they not come, and from the oblivious flow
Drink at one draught a universe of peace?

ATLANTIS



Above its domes the gulfs accumulate
To where the sea-winds trumpet forth their screed;
But here the buried waters take no heed —
Deaf, and with closed lips from press of weight
Imposed by ocean. Dim, inanimate,
On temples of an unremembered creed
Involved in long, slow tentacles of weed,
The dead tide lies immovable as Fate.

From out the ponderous-vaulted ocean-dome,
A clouded light is questionably shed
On altars of a goddess garlanded
With blossoms of some weird and hueless vine;
And wingèd, fleet, through skies beneath the foam,
Like silent birds the sea-things dart and shine.

THE UNREVEALED



How dense the glooms of Death, impervious
To aught of old memorial light! How strait
The sunless road, suspended, separate,
That leads to later birth! Untremulous
With any secret morn of stars, to us
The Past is closed as with division great
Of planet-girdling seas — unknown its gate,
Beyond the mouths of shadows cavernous.

Oh! may it be that Death in kindness strips
The soul of memory's raiment, rendering blind
Our vision, lest surmounted deeps appal,
As when on mountain peaks a glance behind
Betrays with knowledge, and the climber slips
Down gulfs of fear to some enormous fall?

THE ELDRITCH DARK



Now as the twilight's doubtful interval
Closes with night's accomplished certainty,
A wizard wind goes crying eerily;
And in the glade unsteady shadows crawl,
Timed to the trees, whose voices rear and fall
As with some dreadful witches' ecstasy,
Flung upward to the dark, whence glitters free
The crooked moon, impendent over all.

Twin veils of covering cloud and silence thrown
Across the movement and the sound of things,
Make blank the night, till in the broken west
The moon's ensanguined blade awhile is shown...
The night grows whole again... The shadows rest,
Gathered beneath a greater shadow's wings.

THE CHERRY-SNOWS



The cherry-snows are falling now;
Down from the blossom-clouded sky
Of zephyr-troubled twig and bough,
In widely settling whirls they fly.

The orchard earth, unclothed and brown,
Is wintry-hued with petals bright;
E'en as the snow they glimmer down;
Brief as the snow's their stainless white.

FAIRY LANTERNS



‘Tis said these blossom-lanterns light
The elves upon their midnight way;
That fairy toil and elfin play
Receive their beams of magic white.

I marvel not if it be true;
I know this flower has lighted me
Nearer to Beauty’s mystery,
And past the veils of secrets new.

NIRVANA



Poised as a god whose lone, detachèd post,
An eyrie, pends between the boundary-marks
Of finite years, and those unvaried darks
That veil Eternity, I saw the host
Of worlds and suns, swept from the furthestmost
Of night — confusion as of dust with sparks —
Whirl tow'rd the opposing brink; as one who harks
Some warning trumpet, Time, a withered ghost,
Fled with them; disunited orbs that late
Were atoms of the universal frame,
They passed to some eternal fragment-heap.
And, lo, the gods, from space disincorporate,
Who were its life and vital spirit, came,
Drawn outward by the vampire-lips of Sleep!

THE NEMESIS OF SUNS



Lo, what are these, the gyres of sun and world,
Fulfilled with daylight by each toiling sun —
Lo, what are these but webs of radiance spun
Beneath the roof of Night, and torn or furled
By Night at will? All opposite powers upwhirled
Are less than chaff to this imperious one —
As wind-tossed chaff, until its sport be done,
Scattered, and lifted up, and downward hurled.

All gyres are held within the path unspanned
Of Night's aeonian compass — loosely pent
As with the embrace of lethal-tightening weight;
All suns are grasped within the hollow hand
Of Night, the godhead sole, omnipotent,
Whose other names are Nemesis and Fate.

WHITE DEATH



Methought the world was bound with final frost;
The sun, made hueless as with fear and awe,
Illumined yet the lands it could not thaw.
Then on my road, with instant evening crost,
Death stood, and in its shadowy films enwound,
Mine eyes forgot the light, until I came
Where poured the inseparate, unshadowed flame
Of phantom suns in self-irradiance drowned.

Death lay revealed in all its haggardness —
Immitigable wastes horizonless;
Profundities that held nor bar nor veil;
All hues wherewith the suns and worlds were dyed
In light invariable nullified;
All darkness rendered shelterless and pale.

RETROSPECT AND FORECAST



Turn round, O Life, and know with eyes aghast
The breast that fed thee — Death, disguiseless, stern;
Even now, within thy mouth, from tomb and urn,
The dust is sweet. All nurture that thou hast
Was once as thou, and fed with lips made fast
On Death, whose sateless mouth it fed in turn.
Kingdoms debased, and thrones that starward yearn,
All are but ghouls that batten on the past.

Monstrous and dread, must it fore'er abide,
This unescapable alternity?
Must loveliness find root within decay,
And night devour its flaming hues alway?
Sickening, will Life not turn eventually,
Or ravenous Death at last be satisfied?

SHADOW OF NIGHTMARE



What hand is this, that unresisted grips
My spirit as with chains, and from the sound
And light of dreams, compels me to the bound
Where darkness waits with wide, expectant lips?
Albeit thereat my footing holds, nor slips,
The threats of that Omnipotence confound
All days and hours of gladness, girt around
With sense of near, unswervable eclipse.

So lies a land whose noon is plagued with whirr
Of bats, than their own shadows swarthier,
Whose flight is traced on roofs of white abodes,
Wherein from court to court, from room to room,
In hieroglyphics of abhorrent doom,
Is slowly trailed the slime of crawling toads.

THE SONG OF A COMET



A plummet of the changing universe,
Far-cast, I flare
Through gulfs the sun's uncharted orbits bind,
And spaces bare
That intermediate darks immerse
By road of sun nor world confined.
Upon my star-undominated gyre
I mark the systems vanish one by one;
Among the swarming worlds I lunge,
And sudden plunge
Close to the zones of solar fire;
Or 'mid the mighty wrack of stars undone,
Flash, and with momentary rays
Compel the dark to yield
Their aimless forms, whose once far-potent blaze
In ashes chill is now inurned.
A space revealed,
I see their planets turned,
Where holders of the heritage of breath
Exultant rose, and sank to barren death
Beneath the stars' unheeding eyes.
Adown contiguous skies
I pass the thickening brume
Of systems yet unshaped, that hang immense
Along mysterious shores of gloom;

Or see — unimplicated in their doom —
The final and disastrous gyre
Of blinded suns that meet,
And from their mingled heat,
And battle-clouds intense,
O'erspread the deep with fire.

Through stellar labyrinths I thrid
Mine orbit placed amid
The multiple and irised stars, or hid,
Unsolved and intricate,
In many a planet-swinging sun's estate.
Ofttimes I steal in solitary flight
Along the rim of the exterior night
That grips the universe;
And then return,
Past outer footholds of sidereal light,
To where the systems gather and disperse;
And dip again into the web of things,
To watch it shift and burn,
Hearted with stars. On peaceless wings
I pierce, where deep-outstripping all surmise,
The nether heavens drop unsunned,
By stars and planets shunned.
And then I rise
Through vaulting gloom, to watch the dark
Snatch at the flame of failing suns;
Or mark
The heavy-dusked and silent skies,

Strewn thick with wrecked and broken stars,
Where many a fated orbit runs.
An arrow sped from some eternal bow,
Through change of firmaments and systems sent,
And finding bourn nor bars,
I flee, nor know
For what eternal mark my flight is meant.

THE RETRIBUTION



Old Egypt's gods, Osiris, Ammon, Thoth,
Came on my dream in thunder, and their feet
Revealed, were as the levin's fire and heat.
The hosts of Rome, the Arab and the Goth
Have left their altars dark, yet stern and wroth
In olden power they stood, whose wings were fleet,
And mighty as with strength of storms that meet
In mingled foam of clouds and ocean-froth.

Above my dream, with arch of dreaded wings,
In judgement and in sentence of what crime
I knew not, sate the gods outcast of time.
They passed, and lo, a plague of darkness fell,
Unsleeping, and accurst with nameless things,
And dreams that stood the ministers of Hell!

TO THE DARKNESS



Thou hast taken the light of many suns,
And they are sealed in the prison-house of gloom.
Even as candle-flames
Hast thou taken the souls of men,
With winds from out a hollow place;
They are hid in the abyss as in a sea,
And the gulfs are over them
As the weight of many peaks,
As the depth of many seas;
Thy shields are between them and the light;
They are past its burden and bitterness;
The spears of the day shall not touch them,
The chains of the sun shall not hale them forth.

Many men there were,
In the days that are now of thy realm,
That thou hast sealed with the seal of many deeps;
Their feet were as eagles' wings in the quest of Truth —
Aye, mightily they desired her face,
Hunting her through the lands of life,
As men in the blankness of the waste
That seek for a buried treasure-house of kings.
But against them were the veils
That hands may not rend nor sabers pierce;
And Truth was withheld from them,

As a water that is seen afar at dawn,
And at noon is lost in the sand
Before the feet of the traveller.
The world was a barrenness,
And the gardens were as the waste.
And they turned them to the adventure of the dark,
To the travelling of the land without roads,
To the sailing of the sea that hath no beacons.
Why have they not returned?
Their quest hath found end in thee,
Or surely they had fared
Once more to the place whence they came,
As men that have travelled to a fruitless land.
They have looked on thy face,
And to them it is the countenance of Truth.
Thy silence is sweeter to them than the voice of love,
Thine embrace more dear than the clasp of the beloved.
They are fed with the emptiness past the veil,
And their hunger is filled;
They have found the waters of peace,
And are athirst no more.
They know a rest that is deeper than the gulfs,
And whose seal is unbreakable as the seal of the void;
They sleep the sleep of the suns,
And the vast is a garment unto them.

A DREAM OF BEAUTY



I dreamed that each most lovely, perfect thing
That Nature hath, of sound, and form, and hue —
The winds, the grass, the light-concentering dew,
The gleam and swiftness of the sea-bird's wing;
Blueness of sea and sky, and gold of storm
Transmuted by the sunset, and the flame
Of autumn-colored leaves, before me came,
And, meeting, merged to one diviner form.

Incarnate Beauty 'twas, whose spirit thrills
Through glaucous ocean and the greener hills,
And in the cloud-bewildered peaks is pent.
Like some descended star she hovered o'er,
But as I gazed, in doubt and wonderment,
Mine eyes were dazzled, and I saw no more.

THE DREAM-BRIDGE



All drear and barren seemed the hours,
That passed rain-swept and tempest-blown.
The dead leaves fell like brownish notes
Within the rain's grey monotone.

There came a lapse between the showers;
The clouds grew rich with sunset gleams;
Then o'er the sky a rainbow sprang —
A bridge unto the Land of Dreams.

A LIVE-OAK LEAF



How marvellous this bit of green
I hold, and soon shall throw away!
Its subtile veins, its vivid sheen,
Seem fragment of a god's array.

In all the hidden toil of earth,
Which is the more laborious part —
To rear the oak's enormous girth,
Or shape its leaves with poignant art?

PINE NEEDLES



O little lances, dipped in grey,
And set in order straight and clean,
How delicately clear and keen
Your points against the sapphire day!

Attesting Nature's perfect art
Ye fringe the limpid firmament,
O little lances, keenly sent
To pierce with beauty to the heart!

TO THE SUN



Thy light is as an eminence unto thee,
And thou are upheld by the pillars of thy strength.
Thy power is a foundation for the worlds;
They are builded thereon as upon a lofty rock
Whereto no enemy hath access.
Thou puttest forth thy rays, and they hold the sky
As in the hollow of an immense hand.
Thou erectest thy light as four walls,
And a roof with many beams and pillars.
Thy flame is a stronghold based as a mountain;
Its bastions are tall, and firm like stone.

The worlds are bound with the ropes of thy will;
Like steeds are they stayed and contrained
By the reins of invisible lightnings.
With bands that are stouter than iron manifold,
And stronger than the cords of the gulfs,
Thou withholdest them from the brink
Of outward and perilous deeps,
Lest they perish in the desolations of the night,
Or be stricken of strange suns;
Lest they be caught in the pitfalls of the abyss,
Or fall into the furnace of Arcturus.
Thy law is as a shore unto them,
And they are restrained thereby as the sea.

Thou art food and drink to the worlds;
Yea, by thy toil are they sustained,
That they fail not upon the road of space,
Whose goal is Hercules.
When thy pillars of force are withdrawn,
And the walls of thy light fall inward,
Borne down by the sundering night,
And thy head is covered with the Shadow,
The worlds shall wander as men bewildered
In the sterile and lifeless waste.
Athirst and unfed shall they be,
When the springs of thy strength are dust,
And thy fields of light are black with dearth.
They shall perish from the ways
That thou showest no longer,
And emptiness shall close above them.

THE FUGITIVES



O fugitive fragrances
That tremble heavenward
Unceasing, or if ye linger,
Halt but as memories
On the verge of forgetfulness,
Why must ye pass so fleetly
On wings that are less than wind,
To a death unknowable?
Soon ye are gone, and the air
Forgets your faint unrest
In the garden's breathlessness,
Where fall the snows of silence.

AVERTED MALEFICE



Where mandrakes, crying from the moonless fen,
Told how a witch, with gaze of owl or bat
Found, and each root malevolently fat
Pulled for her waiting cauldron, on my ken
Upstole, escaping to the world of men,
A vapor as of some infernal vat;
Against the stars it clomb, and caught thereat
As if their bright regard to veil again.

Despite the web, methought they saw, appalled,
The stealthier weft in which all sound was still ...
Then sprang, as if the night found breath anew,
A wind whereby the stars were disenthralled ...
Far off, I heard the cry of frustrate ill —
A witch that wailed above her curdled brew.

THE MEDUSA OF THE SKIES



Haggard as if resurgent from a tomb,
The moon uprears her ghastly, shrunken head,
Crowned with such light as flares upon the dead
From pallid skies more death-like than the gloom.
Now fall her beams till slope and plain assume
The whiteness of a land whence life is fled;
And shadows that a sepulcher might shed
Move livid as the stealthy hands of doom.

O'er rigid hills and valleys locked and mute,
A pallor steals as of a world made still
When Death, that erst had crept, stands absolute —
An earth now frozen fast by power of eyes
That malefice and purposed silence fill,
The gaze of that Medusa of the skies.

A DEAD CITY



The twilight reigns above the fallen noon
Within an ancient land, whose after-time
Lies like a shadow o'er its ruined prime.
Like rising mist the night increases soon
Round shattered palaces, ere yet the moon
On mute, unsentried walls and turrets climb,
And touch with whiteness of sepulchral rime
The desert where a city's bones are strewn.

She comes at last; unburied, thick, they show
In all the hoary nakedness of stone.
From out a shadow like the lips of Death
Issues a wind, that through the stillness blown,
Cries like a prophet's ghost with wailing breath
The weirds of finished and forgotten woe.

THE SONG OF THE STARS



From the final reach of the upper night
To the nether darks where the comets die,
From the outmost bourn of the reigns of light
To the central gloom of the midmost sky,
In our mazeful gyres we fly.
And our flight is a choral chant of flame,
That ceaseless fares to the outer void,
With the undersong of the peopled spheres,
The voices of comet and asteroid,
And the wail of the spheres destroyed.
Forever we sing to a god unseen —
In the dark shall our voices fail?
The void is his robe inviolate,
The night is his awful veil —
How our fires grow dim and pale!

From the ordered gyres goes ever afar
Our song of flame o'er the void unknown,
Where circles nor world, nor comet, nor star.
Shall it die ere it reach His throne?

On the shoreless deeps of the seas of gloom
Sailing, we venture afar and wide,
Where ever await the tempests of doom,
Where the silent maelstroms lurk and hide,
And the darkling reefs abide.

And the change and ruin of stars is a song
That rises and ebbs in a tide of fire —
A music whose notes are of dreadful flame,
Whose harmonies ever leap high'r
Where the suns and the worlds expire.
Is such music not fit for a god?
Yet ever the deep is a dark,
And ever the night is a void,
Nor brightens a word nor a mark
To show if our God may hark.

From the gyres of change goes ever afar
Our flaming chant o'er the deep unknown,
The song of the death of planet and star.
Shall it die ere it reach His throne?

In our shadows of light the planets sweep,
And endure for the span of our prime —
Globed atoms that hazard the termless deep
With races that bow to the law of Time,
And yet cherish a dream sublime.
And they cry to the god behind the veil.
Yet how should their voices pass the night,
The silence that waits in the rayless void,
If he hear not our music of light,
And the thundrous song of our might?
And they strive in the gloom for truth —
Yet how should they pierce the veil,
When we, with our splendors of flame,

In the darkness faint and fail,
Our fires how feeble and pale!

From the ordered gyres goes ever afar
Our song of flame o'er the void unknown,
Where circles nor world, nor comet, nor star,
Shall it die ere it reach His throne?

COPAN



Around its walls the forests of the west
Gloom, as about some mystery's final pale
Might lie its multifold exterior veil.
Sculptured with signs and meanings unconfessed,
Its lordly fanes and palaces attest
A past before whose wall of darkness fail
Reason and fancy, finding not the tale
Erased by time from history's palimpsest.

Within this place, that from the gloom of Eld
Still meets the light, a people came and went
Like whirls of dust between its columns blown —
An alien race, whose record, shadow-held,
Is sealed with those of others long forespent
That died in sunless planets lost and lone.

A SONG OF DREAMS



A voice came to me from the night, and said,
What profit hast thou in thy dreaming
Of the years that are set
And the years yet unrisen?
Hast thou found them tillable lands?
Is there fruit that thou canst pluck therein,
Or any harvest to be mown?
Shalt thou dig aught of gold from the mines of the past,
Or trade for merchandise
In the years where all is rotten?
Are they a sea that will bring thee to any shore,
Or a desert that vergeth upon aught but the waste?
Shalt thou drink from the springs that are emptied,
Or find sustenance in shadows?
What value hath the future given thee?
Is there aught in the days yet dark
That thou canst hold with thy hands?
Are they a fortress
That will afford thee protection
Against the swords of the world?
Is there justice in them
To balance the world's inequity,
Or benefit to outweigh its loss?

Then spake I in answer, saying,
Of my dreams I have made a road,
And my soul goeth out thereon
To that unto which no eye hath opened,
Nor ear become keen to hearken —
To the glories that are shut past all access
Of the keys of sense;
Whose walls are hidden by the air,
And whose doors are concealed with clarity.
And the road is travelled of secret things,
Coming to me from far —
Of bodiless powers,
And beauties without colour or form
Holden by any loveliness seen of earth.
And of my dreams have I builded an inn
Wherein these are as guests.
And unto it come the dead
For a little rest and refuge
From the hollowness of the unharvestable wind,
And the burden of too great space.

The fields of the past are not void to me,
Who harvest with the scythe of thought;
Nor the orchards of future years unfruitful
To the hands of visionings.
I have retrieved from the darkness
The years and the things that were lost,
And they are held in the light of my dreams,
With the spirits of years unborn,

And of things yet bodiless.
As in an hospitable house,
They shall live while the dreams abide.

THE BALANCE



The world upheld their pillars for awhile —
Now, where imperial On and Memphis stood,
The hot wind sifts across the solitude
The sand that once was wall and peristyle,
Or furrows like the main each desert mile,
Where ocean-deep above its ancient food
Of cities fame-forgot, the waste is nude,
Traceless as billows of each sunken pile.

Lo! for that wrong shall vengeance come at last,
When the devouring earth, in ruin one
With royal walls and palaces undone,
And sunk within the desolated past,
Shall drift, and winds that wrangle through the vast
Immingle it with ashes of the sun.

SATURN



Now were the Titans gathered round their king,
In a waste region slipping tow'rd the verge
Of drear extremities that clasp the world —
A land half-moulded by the hasty gods,
And left beneath the bright scorn of the stars,
Grotesque, misfeatured, blackly gnarled with stone;
Or worn and marred from conflict with the deep
Conterminate, of Chaos. Here they stood,
Old Saturn midmost, like a central peak
Among the lesser hills that guard its base.
Defeat, that gloamed within each countenance
Like the first tinge of death, upon a sun
Gathering like some dusk vapor, found them cold,
Clumsy of limb, and halting as with weight
Of threatened worlds and trembling firmaments.
A wind cried round them like a trumpet-voice
Of phantom hosts — hurried, importunate,
And intermittent with a tightening fear.
Far off the sunset leapt, and the hard clouds,
Molten among the peaks, seemed furnaces
In which to make the fetters of the world.

Seared by the lightning of the younger gods,
They saw, beyond the grim and crouching hills,
Those levins thrust like spears into the heart

Of swollen clouds, or tearing through the sky
Like severing swords. Then, as the Titans watched,
The night rose like a black, enormous mist
Around them, wherein naught was visible
Save the sharp levin leaping in the north;
And no sound came, except of seas remote,
That seemed like Chaos ravening past the verge
Of all the world, fed with the crumbling coasts
Of Matter.

Till the moon, discovering
That harsh swart wilderness of sand and stone
Tissued and twisted in chaotic weld,
Lit with illusory fire each Titan's form,
They sate in silence, mute as stranded orbs —
The wrack of Time, upcast on ruinous coasts,
And in the slow withdrawal of the tide
Safe for awhile. Small solace did they take
From that frore radiance glistening on the dull
Black desert gripped in iron silences,
Like a false triumph o'er contestless fates,
Or a mirage of life in wastes of Death.
Yet were they moved to speak, and Saturn's voice
Seeming the soul of that tremendous land
Set free in sound, startled the haughty stars.

“O Titans, gods, sustainers of the world,
Is this the end? Must Earth go down to Chaos,
Lacking our strength, beneath the unpracticed sway

Of godlings vain, precipitate with youth,
Who think, unrecking of disastrous chance,
To bind their will as reins upon the sun,
Or stand as columns to the ponderous heavens?
Must we behold, with eyes of impotence
That universal wrack, even though it overwhelm
These our usurpers in impartial doom
Beneath the shards and fragments of the world?
Were it not preferable to return,
And meeting them in fight unswervable,
Drag down the earth, ourselves, and these our foes,
One sacrifice unto the gods of Chaos?
Why should we stay, and live the tragedy
Of power that survives its use?"

Now spake
Enceladus, when that the echoings
Of Saturn's voice had fled remote, and seemed
Dead thunders caught and flung from star to star;
"Wouldst hurl thy kingdom down the nightward gulf,
Like to a stone a curious child might cast
To test the fall of some dark precipice?
Patience and caution should we take as mail,
Not rashness for a weapon — too keen sword
That cuts the strained knot of destiny,
Ne'er to be tied again. Were it not best
To watch the slow procedure of the days,
That we may grasp a time more opportune,
When desperation is not all our strength,

Nor the foe newly filled with victory?
Then may we hope to conquer back thy realm
For thee, not for the gods of nothingness.”

He ceased, and after him no lesser god
Gave voice upon the shaken silences,
None venturing to risk comparison,
Inevitable then, of eloquence
With his; but silence like the ambiguousness
Of signal and of lesser stars o’ercast
And merged in one confusion by the moon,
Possessed that multitude, till Saturn rose.
Around his form the light intensified,
And strengthened with addition wild and strange,
Investing him as with a phantom robe,
And gathering like a crown about his brow.
His sword, whereon the shadows lay like rust
He took, and dipping it within the moon,
Made clean its length of blade, and from it cast
Swift flickerings at the stars. And then his voice
Came like a torrent, and from out his eyes
Streamed wilder power that mingled with the sound.

* * * * *

And his resurgent power, in glance and word,
Poured through the Titans’ souls, and was become
The fountains of their own, and at his flame
Their fires were lit once more, whose restlessness

Leapt and aspired against the steadfast stars.
And now they turned, majestic with resolve,
Where, red upon the forefront of the north,
Arcturus was a beacon to the winds.
And with the flickering winds, that lightly struck
The desert dust, then sprang again in air,
They passed athwart the foreland of the north.

Against their march they saw the shrunken waste,
A rivelled region like a world grown old
Whose sterile breast knew not the lips of Life
In all its epoch; or a world that was
The nurse of infant Death, ere he became
Too large, too strong for its restraining arms,
And towered athwart the suns.

And there they crossed
Metallic slopes that rang like monstrous shields,
But gave not to their tread, and clanging plains
Like body-mail of greater, vaster gods.
Where hills made gibbous shadows in the moon,
They heard the eldritch laughters of the wind,
Seeming the mirth of death; and 'neath their gaze
Gaunt valleys deepened like an old despair.
Yet strode they on, through the moon's fantasies,
Bold with resolve, across a land like doubt.

And now they passed among huge mountain-bulks,
Themselves like peaks detached, and moving slow

‘Mid fettered brethren, adding weight and gloom
To that mute conclave great against the stars.
Emerging thence, the Titans marched where still
Their own portentous shadows went before
Like night that fled but shrunk not, dusking all
That desert way.

And thus they came where Sleep,
The sleep of weary victory, had seized
The younger gods as captives, borne beyond
All flight of mounting battle-ecstasies
In that high triumph of forgetfulness.
And on that sleep the striding Titans broke,
Vague and immense at first like forming dreams
To those disturbèd gods, in mist of drowse
Purblind and doubtful yet, though soon they knew
Their erst-defeated foes, and rising stood
In silent ranks expectant, that appeared
To move, with shaking of astonished fires
That bristled forth, or were displayed like plumes
Late folded close, now trembling terribly,
Pending between the desert and the stars.
Then, sudden as the waking from a dream,
The battle leapt, where striving shapes of gods
Moved brightly through the whirled and stricken air,
Sweeping it to a froth of fire; and all
That ancient, deep-established desert rocked,
Shaken as by an onset of the gulfs
Of gathered and impatient Chaos, while,

Above the place where central battle burned
The stars drew back in fright or dazzlement,
Paling to more secluded distances.
Lo, where the moon had wrought illusive dreams
That clothed the wild in doubt and fantasy,
Hiding its hideousness with bright mirage,
Or deepening it with gulfs and glooms of Hell,
Mightier confusion, chaos absolute
Upon the imperilled sky and trembling world,
Now made a certainty within itself,
The one thing sure in shaken sky or world.
Maelstroms of battle caught in storms of fire,
Torn and involved by weaponry of gods —
Crescented blades that met with rounds of shields;
Grappling of shapes, seen through the riven blaze
An instant, then once more obscure, and known
Only by giant heavings of that war
Of furious gods and roused elements,
Divided, leagued, contending evermore
Along the desert — these, augmentative
Round one thick center, stunned the faltering night.

So huge that chaos, complicate within
With movements of gigantic legionry,
Antagonistic streams, impetuous-hurled
Where Jove and Saturn thunder-crested, led
In fight unswervable — so wide the strife
Of differing impulse, that Decision found
No foothold, till that first confusion should

In ordered conflict re-arrange, and stand
With its true forces known. This seemed remote,
With that wide struggle pending terribly,
As if all-various, colored Time had made
A truce with white Eternity, and both
Stood watching from afar.

Through drifts of haze
The broadening moon, made ominous with red,
Glared from the westering night. And now that war
Built for itself, far up, a cope of cloud,
And drew it down, far off, upon all sides,
Impervious to the moon and sworded stars.
And by their own wild light the gods fought on
‘Neath that stupendous concave like a sky
Filled and illumed with glare of bursting suns.
And cast by their own light, upon that sky
The gods’ own shadows moved like shapen gloom,
Phantasmagoric, changed and amplified,
A shifting frieze that flickered dreadfully
In spectral battle indecisive. Then,
Swift, as it had begun, the contest turned,
And on the heaving Titans’ massive front
It seemed that all the motion and the strength
Self-thwarting and confounded, of that strife,
Was flung in centered impact terrible,
With rush of all that fire, tempestuous-blown
As if before some wind of further space,
Striking the earth. Lo, all the Titans’ flame

Bent back upon themselves, and they were hurled
In vaster disarray, with vanguard piled
On rear and center. Saturn could not stem
The loosened torrents of long-pent defeat;
He, with his host, was but as drift thereon,
Borne wildly down the whelmed and reeling world.

Hurling like slanted rain, the lurid levin
Fell o'er that flight of Titans, and behind,
In striding menace, all-victorious Jove
Loomed like some craggy cloud with thunders crowned
And footed with the winds. In that defeat,
With Jove's pursuit involved and manifold,
Few found escape unscathed, and some went down
Like senile suns that grapple with the dark,
And reel in flame tremendous, and are still.

Ebbing, the battle left those elder gods
Upcast once more on coasts of black defeat —
Gripped in despair, a vaster Tartarus.
The victor gods, their storms and thunders spent,
Went dwindling northward like embattled clouds,
And where the lingering haze of fight dissolved,
The pallor of the dawn began to spread
On darkness purple like the pain of Death.
Ringed with that desolation, Saturn stood
Mute, and the Titans answered unto him
With brother silence. Motionless, they seemed
Some peristyle or range of columns great,

Alone enduring of a fallen fane
In deserts of some vaster world whence Life
And Faith have vanished long, that vaguely slips
To an immemorial end. And twilight slow
Crept round those lofty shapes august, and seemed
Such as might be the faltering ghostly noon
Of mightier suns that totter down to death.

Then turned they, passing from that dismal place
Blasted anew with battle, ere the swift
Striding of light athwart stupendous chasms
And wasteful plains, should overtake them there,
Bowed with too heavy a burden of defeat.
Slowly they turned, and passed upon the west
Where, like a weariness immovable
In menace huge, the plain its monstrous bulk,
The peaks its hydra heads, the whole world crouched
Against their march with the diminished stars.

FINIS



It seemed that from the west
The live red flame of sunset,
Eating the dead blue sky
And cold insensate peaks,
Was loosened slowly, and fell.
Above it, a few red stars
Burned down like low candle-flames
Into the gaunt black sockets
Of the chill insensible mountains.
But in the ascendant skies
(Cloudless, like some vast corpse
Unfeatured, cerementless)
Succeeded nor star nor planet.
It may have been that black,
Pulseless, dead stars arose
And crossed as of old the heavens.
But came no living orb,
Nor comet seeming the ghost,
Homeless, of an outcast world,
Seeking its former place
That is no more nor shall be
In all the Cosmos again.
Null, blank, and meaningless
As a burnt scroll that blackens
With the passing of the fire,

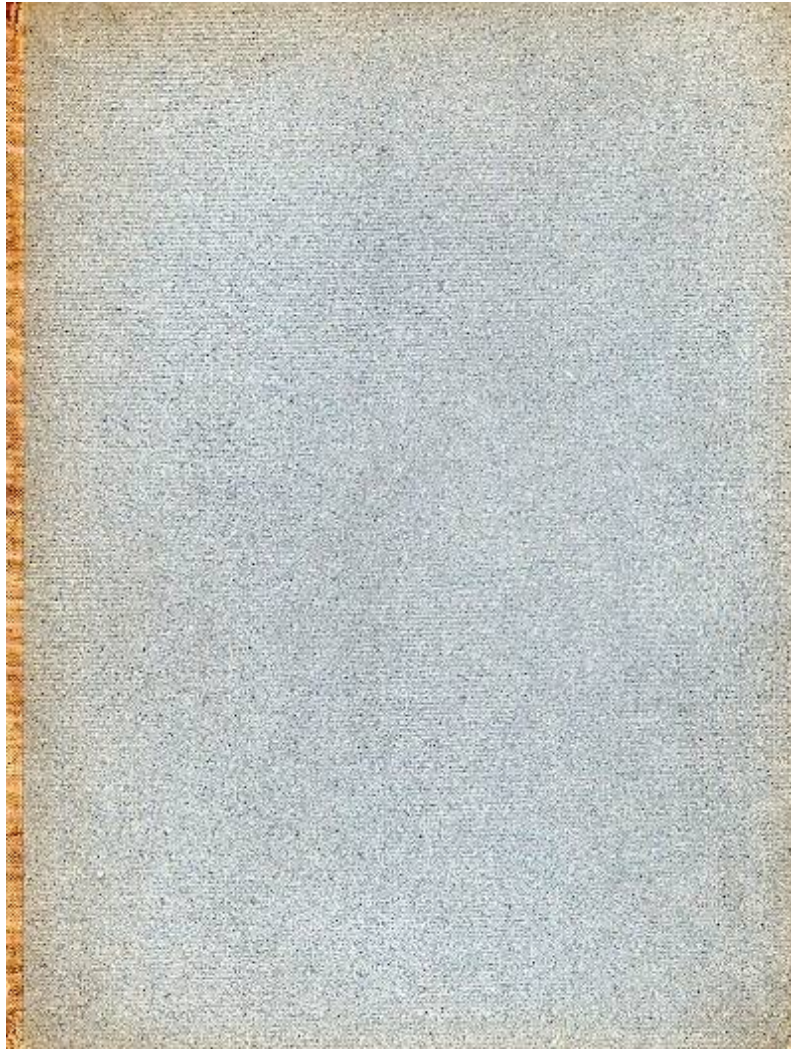
Lay the dead infinite sky.
Lo! in the halls of Time,
I thought, the torches are out —
The revelry of the gods,
Or lamentation of demons
For which their flames were lit,
Over and quiet at last
With the closing peace of night,
Whose dumb, dead, passionless skies
Enfold the living world
As the sea a sinking pebble.



Odes and Sonnets (1918)



After the initial success of his first poetry collection and the gradual loss of interest in his work, Smith's health eventually broke down. For eight years his literary production was intermittent, though critics generally agree that he produced his most accomplished verse during this trying period. A small volume, *Odes and Sonnets*, was brought out in 1918. It was during this time that he had come into contact with literary figures that would later form part of H. P. Lovecraft's circle of correspondents. In fact, Smith had known most of them far earlier than Lovecraft. These figures included the poet Samuel Loveman and bookman George Kirk.



The first edition

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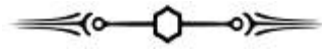
The Medusa of Despair

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Smith in his younger years

Satan Unrepentant



Lost from those archangelic thrones that star,
Fadeless and fixed, heaven's light of azure bliss;
Forbanned of all His splendor and depressed
Beyond the birth of the first sun, and lower
Than the last star's decline, I still endure,
Abased, majestic, fallen, beautiful,
And unregretful in the doubted dark,
Throneless, that greatens chaos-ward, albeit
From chanting stars that throng the nave of night
Lost echoes wander here, and of His praise
With ringing moons for cymbals dinned afar,
And shouted from the flaming mouths of suns.

The shadows of impalpable blank deeps —
Deep upon deep accumulate — close down,
Around my head centered, while above,
In the lit, loftier blue, star after star
Spins endless orbits betwixt me and heaven;
And at my feet mysterious Chaos breaks,
Abrupt, immeasurable. Round His throne
Throbs now the rhythmic resonance of suns,
Incessant, perfect, music infinite:
I, throneless, hear the discords of the dark,
And roar of ruin uncreate, than which

Some vast cacophony of dragons, heard
In wasted worlds, were purer melody.

The universe His tyranny constrains
Turns on: in old and consummated gulfs
The stars that wield His judgement wait at hand,
And in new deeps Apocalyptic suns
Prepare His coming: lo, His mighty whim
To rear and mar, goes forth enormously
In nights and constellations! Darkness hears
Enraged suns that bellow down the deep
God's ravenous and insatiable will;
And He is strong with change, and rideth forth
In whirlwind clothed, with thunders and with doom
To the red stars: God's throne is reared of change;
Its myriad and successive hands support
Like music His omnipotence, that fails
If mercy or if justice interrupt
The sequence of that tyranny, begun
Upon injustice, and doomed evermore
To stand thereby.

I, who with will not less
Than His, but lesser strength, opposed to Him
This unsubmissive brow and lifted mind,
He holds remote in nullity and night
Doubtful between old Chaos and the deeps
Betrayed by Time to vassalage. Methinks
All tyrants fear whom they may not destroy,

And I, that am of essence one with His,
Though less in measure, He may not destroy,
And but withstands in gulfs of dark suspense,
A secret dread for ever: for God knows
This quiet will irrevocably set
Against His own, and this my prime revolt
Yet stubborn, and confirmed eternally.
And with the hatred born of fear, and fed
Ever thereby, God hates me, and His gaze
Sees the bright menace of mine eyes afar
Through midnight, and the innumerable blaze
Of servile suns: lo, strong in tyranny,
The despot trembles that I stand opposed!
For fain am I to hush the anguished cries
Of Substance, broken on the racks of change,
Of Matter tortured into life; and God,
Knowing this, dreads evermore some huge mishap —
That in the vigils of Omnipotence,
Once careless, I shall enter heaven, or He,
Himself, with weight of some unwonted act,
Thoughtless perturb His balanced tyranny,
To mine advance of watchful aspiration.

With rumored thunder and enormous groan
(Burden of sound that heavens overborne
Let slip from deep to deep, even to this
Where climb the huge cacophonies of Chaos)
God's universe moves on. Confirmed in pride,
In patient majesty serene and strong,

I wait the dreamt, inevitable hour
Fulfilled of orbits ultimate, when God,
Whether through His mischance or mine own deed,
Or rise of other and extremer Strength,
Shall vanish, and the lightened universe
No more remember Him than Silence does
An ancient thunder. I know not if these,
Mine all-indomitable eyes, shall see
A maimed and dwindled Godhead cast among
The stars of His creating, and beneath
The unnumbered rush of swift and shining feet
Trodden into night; or mark the fiery breath
Of His infuriate suns blaze forth upon
And scorch that coarsened Essence; or His flame,
A mightier comet, roar and redden down,
Portentous unto Chaos. I but wait,
In strong majestic patience equable,
That hour of consummation and of doom,
Of justice, and rebellion justified.

Alexandrines



Knowing the weariness of dreams, and days, and nights,
The great and grievous vanity of joy and pain;
Frail loves that pass, where languors infinite remain,
Fervors and long despairs and desperate, brief delights;

Knowing how in the witless brains of them that were,
The drowsy, wiving worm hath prospered and hath died;
Knowing that, evermore, by moon and sun abide
The standing glooms made stagnant in the sepulcher;

Knowing the vacillant leaves that tremble, flame, and fall,
The sweetly-wasting rose, the dawns and stars that wane —
Knowing these things, the desolate heart and soul are fain
Of the one perfect sleep which filleth, foldeth all.

Exotique



Thy mouth is like a crimson orchid-flower
Whence perfume and whence poison rise unseen
To moons aswim in iris or in green,
Or mix with morning in an eastern bower.

Thou shouldst have known, in amarathine isles,
The sunsets hued like fire of frankincense,
And noontides fraught with far-borne redolence,
The mingled spicery of purple miles.

Thy breasts, where blood and molten marble flow,
Thy warm white limbs, thy loins of tropic snow —
These, these, by which desire is grown divine,

Were made for dreams in mystic palaces,
For love and sleep and slow voluptuousness,
And summer seas afoam like foaming wine.

Ave Atque Vale



Black dreams; the pale and sorrowful desire
Whose eyes have looked on Lethe and have seen,
Deep in the sliding ebon tide serene,
Their own vain light inverted; the vain lyre
That only tells of love and languishing;
Autumnal roses blind with rain; slow foam
From desert-sinking seas, with honeycomb
Of aconite and poppy — these I bring
With this my bitter, barren love to thee;
And from the grievous springs of memory,
Far in the great Maremma of my heart,
I proffer thee to drink; and on thy mouth,
With the one kiss wherein we meet and part,
Leave fire and dust from quenchless leagues of drouth.

The Ministers of Law



The glories and the perils of thy day
Are one, O Man ! Thou goest to thine end
With Powers, and for a little thou dost wend
With marshalled Majesties upon their way:
But thee the dread Necessities betray
That nurse, and fearful Splendors that befriend;
And thee shall alien Dominations rend...
Deemest the triumph of the worlds to stay,
Or step by step, through eons overpassed,
Stride with the suns upon their road of awe ?
Thou travelest brief ways that end and sink —
Urged by the hurrying planets; and the vast,
Prone-rushing constellations of the Law
Thunder and press behind thee at the brink.

The Refuge of Beauty



From regions of the sun's half-dreamt decay,
All day the cruel rain strikes darkly down;
And from the night thy fatal stars shall frown —
Beauty, wilt thou abide this night and day ?

Roofless, at portals dark and desperate,
Wilt thou a shelter unrefused implore,
And past the tomb's too-hospitable door
Evade thy lover in eluding Hate ?

Alas, for what have I to offer thee ? —
Chill halls of mind, dank rooms of memory
Where thou shalt dwell with woes and thoughts infirm;

This rumor-throngèd citadel of Sense,
Trembling before some nameless imminence;
And fellow-guestship with the glutless Worm.

The Crucifixion of Eros



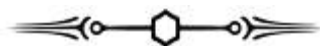
Because of thee immortal Love hath died:
Because thy wilful heart will not believe,
Thy hands and mine a thorny crown must weave,
And build a cross for Love the crucified.

Behold, how beautiful the limbs that bleed —
The limbs that bleed, O stubborn heart, for us !
Stilled are the lids so softly tremulous,
And mute the mouth of our eternal need...

Though this thy fearful lips would now deny,
Love is divine and cannot wholly die:
Draw forth the nails thy tender hands have driven,

And we will know the mercy infinite,
Will find redemption in our own delight,
And in each other's heart the only heaven.

The Harlot of the World



O Life, thou harlot who beguilest all!
Beautiful in thy house, the golden world.
Abidest thou, where Powers pinion-furled
And flying Splendors follow to thy call.

Innumerable like the stars or like the dust,
Nations and monarchs were thy thralls of yore:
Unto the grave's old womb forevermore
Hast thou betrayed the passion and the lust.

Fair as the moon of summer is thy face,
And mystical with cloudiness of hair...
Only an eye, subornless by delight,

Shall find, within thy phosphorescent gaze,
Those caverns of corruption and despair
Where the Worm toileth in the charnel night.

Belated Love



Ah, woe is me, for Love hath lain asleep,
Hath lain too long in some Circean close —
Till on his dreaming wings the ruined rose
Fell lightly, and the rose-red leaves were deep.

Ah, wellaway, for love is overlate:
Far-wandering, alone, we know not where,
He found the white and purple poppies fair,
Nor heard the summer pass importunate.

Sweet Love, can we forgive thy loitering ?
The golden summer, like a dream at dawn,
Changes, and from our kindled eyes is gone,

And leaves grey autumn... We have heard thy wing
But with a sound of sighing; heart on heart,
In our own sighs we hear thy wing depart.

The Medusa of Despair



I may not mask for ever with the grace
Of woven flowers thine eyes of staring stone:
Ere the lithe adders and the garlands blown,
Parting their tangle, have disclosed thy face
Lethal as are the pale young suns in space —
Ere my life take the likeness of thine own —
Get hence! the dark gods languish on their throne,
And flameless grow the Furies they embrace.

Regressive, through what realms of elder doom
Where even the swart vans of Time are stunned,
Seek thou-some tall Cimmerian citadel,
And proud demonian capitals unsunned
Whose ramparts, ominous with horrent gloom,
Heave worldward on the unwaning light of hell.

Memnon At Midnight



Methought upon the tomb-encumbered shore
I stood of Egypt's lone monarchal stream,
And saw immortal Memnon, throned supreme
In gloom as of that Memphian night of yore:
Fold upon fold purpureal he wore,
Beneath the star-borne canopy extreme —
Carven of silence and colossal dream,
Where waters flowed like sleep forevermore.

Lo, in the darkness, thick with dust of years,
How many a ghostly god around his throne,
With thronging wings that were forgotten Fames,
Stood, ere the dawn restore to ancient ears
The long-withholden thunder of their names,
And music stilled to monumental stone.

Ebony and Crystal (1922)



POEMS IN VERSE AND PROSE

In 1920 Smith composed a celebrated long poem in blank verse, *The Hashish Eater; or, The Apocalypse of Evil*, which would appear in *Ebony and Crystal* (1922). This would lead to Smith receiving a fan letter from H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), a seminal writer of weird, science, fantasy and horror fiction, famous for the creation of the Cthulhu Mythos. It was to be the beginning of fifteen years of friendship and correspondence. With studied playfulness, Smith and Lovecraft would often borrow from each other's coinages of place names and the names of strange gods that populated their tales. Smith's treatment of the Lovecraft theme has been dubbed the "Clark Ashton Smythos." Surprisingly, Smith and Lovecraft never met in person. After Lovecraft's untimely death from cancer in 1937, at the age of forty-four, the Lovecraft Circle carried on. August Derleth founded Arkham House with Donald Wandrei to preserve Lovecraft's works and keep them in print. In time too, the publishing house reprinted and preserved Smith's tales in several important collections.



H. P. Lovecraft, 1915

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A PHANTASY

THE DEMON, THE ANGEL, AND BEAUTY

THE SHADOWS



The first edition'

DEDICATION
TO
SAMUEL LOVEMAN

PREFACE



WHO OF US care to be present at the accouchment of the immortal? I think that we so attend who are first to take this book in our hands. A bold assertion, truly, and one demonstrable only in years remote from these; and — dust wages no war with dust. But it is one of those things that I should most “like to come back and see.”

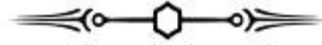
Because he has lent himself the more innocently to the whispers of his subconscious daemon, and because he has set those murmurs to purer and harder crystal than we others, by so much the longer will the poems of Clark Ashton Smith endure. Here indeed is loot against the forays of moth and rust. Here we shall find none or little of the sentimental fat with which so much of our literature is larded. Rather shall one in Imagination’s “misty mid-region,” see elfin rubies burn at his feet, witch-fires glow in the nearer cypresses, and feel upon his brow a wind from the unknown. The brave hunters of fly-specks on Art’s cathedral windows will find little here for their trouble, and both the stupid and the over-sophisticated would best stare owlishly and pass by: here are neither kindergartens nor skyscrapers. But let him who is worthy by reason of his clear eye and unjaded heart wander across these borders of beauty and mystery and be glad.

GEORGE STERLING.

San Francisco, October 28, 1922.

Poems

ARABESQUE

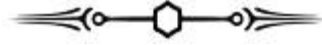


Like arabesques of ebony,
The cypresses, in silhouette,
Fantastically cleave and fret
A moon of yellow ivory.

The coldly colored rays illumine
A leafy pattern manifold,
And all the field is overscrolled
With curiously figured gloom.

Like arabesques of ebony,
Or like Arabian lattices,
Forever seem the cypresses
Before a moon of ivory.

BEYOND THE GREAT WALL



Beyond the far Cathayan wall,
A thousand leagues athwart the sky,
The scarlet stars and mornings die,
The gilded moons and sunsets fall.

Across the sulphur-colored sands
With bales of silk the camels fare,
Harnessed with vermil and with vair,
Into the blue and burning lands.

And, ah, the song the drivers sing,
To while the desert leagues away —
A song they sang in old Cathay,
Ere youth had left the eldest king, —

Ere love and beauty both grew old,
And wonder and romance were flown
On fiery wings to worlds unknown,
To stars of undiscovered gold.

And I their alien words would know,
And follow past the lonely Wall,
Where gilded moons and sunsets fall,
As in a song of long ago.

TO OMAR KHAYYAM



Omar, within thy scented garden-close,
When passed with eventide
The starward incense of the waning rose —
Too fair and dear and precious to abide
After the glad and golden death of spring —
Omar, thou heardest then,
Above the world of men,
The mournful rumour of an iron wing,
The sough and sigh of desolating years,
Whereof the wind is as the winds that blow
Out of a lonesome land of night and snow,
Where ancient winter weeps with frozen tears;
And in thy bodeful ears,
The brief and tiny lisp
Of petals curled and crisp,
Fallen at Eve in Persia's mellow clime,
Was mingled with the mighty sound of time.

Omar, thou knewest well
How the fair days are sorrowful and strange
With time's inexorable mystery
And terror ineluctable of change:
Upon thine eyes the bleak and bitter spell
Of vision, thou didst see,
As in a magic glass,

The moulded mists and painted shadows pass —
The ghostly pomps we name reality.
And, lo, the level field,
With broken fane and throne,
And dust of old, unfabled cities sown,
In unremembering years was made to yield,
From out the shards of Pow'r,
The pillars frail and small
That lift for capital
The blood-like bubble of the poppy-flow'r;
And crowns were crumbled for the airy gold
The crocus and the daffodil should hold
As inalienable dow'r.
Before thy gaze, the sad unvaried green
The cypresses like robes funereal wear,
Was woven on the gradual looms of air,
From threadbare silk and tattered sendaline
That clothed some ancient queen;
And from the spoilt vermilion of her mouth,
The myrtles rose, and from her ruined hair,
And eyes that held the summer's ardent drouth
In blown, forgotten bow'rs;
And amber limbs and breast,
Through ancient nights by sleepless love oppressed,
Or by the iron flight of loveless hours.

Knowing the weary wisdom of the years,
The empty truth of tears;
The suns of June, that with some great excess

Of ardour slay the unabiding rose,
And grey-haired winter, wan and fervourless
For whom no flower grows;
Seeing the scarlet and the gold that pales,
On Orient snows untrod,
In magic morns that grant,
Across a land of common green and gray,
The disenchanted day;
Knowing the iron veils
And walls of adamant,
That ward the flaming verities of God —
Knowing these things, ah, surely thou wert wise,
Beneath the warm and thunder-dreaming skies,
To kiss on ardent breast and avid mouth,
Some girl whose sultry eyes
Were golden with the sun-beloved south —
To pluck the rose and drain the rose-red wine,
In gardens half-divine;
Before the broken cup
Be filled and covered up
In dusty seas of everlasting drouth.

STRANGENESS



O love, thy lips are bright and cold,
Like jewels carven curiously
To symbols of a mystery,
A secret dim, forgotten, old.

Like woven amber, finely spun,
Thy hair, enwoofed with golden light,
Remembers yet the flaming flight
Of some unknown, archaic sun.

Thine eyes are crystals green and chill,
Wherein, as in a shifting sea,
Wan fires and drowning splendours flee
To stealthy deeps forever still.

Fallen across thy dreaming face,
The dawn is made a secret thing,
Like flame of crimson lamps that swing
At midnight, in a cavern-space.

Thy smile is like the furtive gleam
Of fleeing moons a traveller sees
Through closing arms of cypress-trees,
In secret realms of night and dream.

Sphinx-like, unsolved eternally,
Thy beauty's riddle doth abide,

And love hath come, and love hath died,
Striving to read the mystery.

THE INFINITE QUEST



In years no vision shall aver,
In lands no dream may name,
Tow'rd alien things what longings were,
And thence what languors came!

For each horizon straightly sought,
With fealty to the stars,
What death and weariness were bought,
What bitterness, what bars!

* * * * *

I waken unto years afar,
And find the quest made new
In Earth, that was perchance a star
Unto my former view.

ROSA MYSTICA



The secret rose we vainly dream to find,
Was blown in grey Atlantis long ago,
Or in old summers of the realms of snow,
Its attar lulled the pole-arisen wind;
Or once its broad and breathless petals pined
In gardens of Persepolis, aglow
With desert sunlight, and the fiery, slow
Red waves of sand, invincible and blind.

On orient isles, or isles hesperian,
Through mythic days ere mortal time began,
It flowered above the ever-flowering foam;
Or, legendless, in lands of yesteryear,
It flamed among the violets — near, how near,
To unenchanted fields and hills of home!

THE NEREID



Her face the sinking stars desire.
Unto her place the slow deeps bring
Shadow of errant winds that wing
O'er sterile gulfs of foam and fire.

Her beauty is the light of pearls.
All stars and dreams and sunsets die
To make the fluctuant glooms that lie
Around her, and low noonlight swirls

Down ocean's firmamental deep,
To weave for her who glimmers there,
Elusive visions, vague and fair;
And night is as a dreamless sleep:

She has not known the night's unrest,
Nor the white curse of clearer day;
The tremors of the tempest play
Like slow delight about her breast.

Serene, an immanence of fire,
She dwells forever, ocean-thralled,
Soul of the sea's vast emerald;
Her face the sinking stars desire.

IN SATURN



Upon the seas of Saturn I have sailed
To isles of high, primeval amarant,
Where the flame-tongued sonorous flow'rs enchant
The hanging surf to silence: All engrailed

With ruby-colored pearls, the golden shore
Allured me; but as one whom spells restrain,
For blind horizons of the sombre main,
And harbors never known, my singing prore

I set forthrightly: Formed of fire and brass,
Immenser skies divided, deep on deep
Before me, — till, above the darkling foam,

With dome on cloudless adamantine dome,
Black peaks no peering seraph deems to pass,
Rose up from realms ineffable as Sleep!

IMPRESSION



The silver silence of the moon
Upon the sleeping garden lies;
The wind of evening dies,
As in forgetful dreams a ghostly tune.

How white, how still, the flowers are,
As carved of pearl and ivory!
The pines are ebony,
A sombre frieze on heavens pale and far.

Like mirrors made of lucid stone,
The pools lie calm, and bright, and cold,
Where moon and stars behold,
In some eternal trance, themselves alone.

TRIPLE ASPECT



Lo, for Earth's manifest monotony
Of ordered aspect unto sun and star,
And single moon, I turn to years afar,
And ampler worlds ensphered in memory.

There, to the zoned and iris-differing light
Of three swift suns in heavens of vaster range,
Transcendant Beauty knows a trinal change,
And dawn and eve are in the place of night.

There, long ago, in mornings ocean-green,
I saw bright deserts dusky with the sky,
Or under yellow noons, wide waters lie
Like wrinkled bronze made hot with fires unseen.

Strange flow'rs that bloom but to an azure sun,
I saw; and all complexities of light
That work fantastic magic on the sight,
Wrought unimagined marvels one by one.

There, swifter shadows suffer gorgeous dooms —
Lost in an orange noon, an azure morn;
At twofold eve, large, winged lights are born,
Towering to meet the dawn, or briefest glooms

Of chrysoberyl filled with wondering stars,
Draw from an emerald east to skies of gold.

Tow'rd jasper waters leaning to behold,
Vague moons are lost amid great nenuphars.

DESOLATION



It seems to me that I have lived alone —
Alone, as one that liveth in a dream:
As light on coldest marble, or the gleam
Of moons eternal on a land of stone,
The dawns have been to me. I have but known
The silence of a frozen land extreme —
A sole attending silence, all supreme
As is the sea's enormous monotone.

Upon the icy desert of my days,
No bright mirages are, but iron rays
Of dawn relentless, and the bitter light
Of all-revealing noon.* * * * Alone, I crave
The friendly clasp of finite arms, to save
My spirit from the ravening Infinite.

THE ORCHID



Beauty, thou orchid of immortal bloom,
Sprung from the fire and dust of perished spheres,
How art thou tall in these autumnal years
With the red rain of immemorial doom,
And fragrant where but lesser suns illume,
For sustenance of Life's forgotten tears!
Ever thy splendour and thy light appears
Like dawn from out the midnight of the tomb.

Colours, and gleams, and glammers unrecalled,
Richly thy petals intricate revive:
Blossom, whose roots are in Eternity,
The faithful soul, the sentience darkly thralled,
In dream and wonder evermore shall strive
At Edens lost of time and memory.

A FRAGMENT



Autumn far-off in memory,
That saw the crisping myrtles fade!* * * *

Aeons ago, my tomb was made,
Beside the moon-constrained sea.

Ah, wonderful its portals were!
With carven doors of chrysolite,
And walls of sombre syenite,
They wrought mine olden sepulchre!

About the griffin-guarded plinth,
White blossoms crowned the scarlet vine;
And burning orchids opaline
Illumed the palm and terebinth.

On friezes of mine ancient fame,
The cypress wrought its writhen shade;
And through the boughs the ocean made
Moresques of blue and fretted flame.

Poet or prince, I may not know
My perished name, nor bring to mind
Years that are one with dust and wind,
Nor songless love, and tongueless woe — :

Only the tomb they made for me,
With carven doors of chrysolite,
And walls of sombre syenite,
Beside the moon-constrained sea.

CREPUSCLE



The sunset-gonfalons are furled
On plains of evening, broad and pale,
And, wov'n athwart the waning world,
The air is like a silver veil.

Into the thin and trembling gloom,
That holds a hueless warp of light,
The murmuring wind on a slow loom,
Weaves the rich purples of the night.

INFERNO



Grey hells, or hells aglow with hot and scarlet flow'rs;
White hells of light and clamour; hells the abomination
Of breathless, deep sepulchral desolation
Oppresses ever — I have known them all, through hours
Tedious as dead eternity; where timeless pow'rs,
Leagued in malign, omnipotent persuasion —
Wearing the guise of love, despair and aspiration,
Forever drove, through ashen fields and burning bow'rs,

My soul that found no sanctuary.* * * * For Lucifer,
And all the weary, proud, imperious, baffled ones
Made in his image, hell is anywhere: The ice
Of hyperboreal deserts, or the blowing spice
In winds from off Sumatra, for each wanderer
Preserves the jealous flame of sad, infernal suns.

MIRRORS



Mirrors of steel or silver, gold or glass antique!
Whether in melancholy marble palaces
In some long trance you drew the dreamy loveliness
Of Roman queens, or queens barbarical, or Greek;
Or, further than the bright and sun-pursuing beak
Of argosy might fare, beheld the empresses
Of lost Lemuria; or behind the lattices
Alhambran, have returned forbidden smiles oblique

Of wan, mysterious women! — Mirrors, mirrors old,
Mirrors immutable, impassable as Fate,
Your bosoms held the perished beauty of the past
Nearer than straining love might ever hope to hold;
And fleeing faces, lips too phantom-frail to last,
Found in your magic depth a life re-duplicate.

BELATED LOVE



Ah, woe is me, for Love hath lain asleep,
Hath lain too long in some Morphean close, —
Till on his dreaming wings the ruined rose
Fell lightly, and the rose-red leaves were deep.

Alas, alas, for Love is overlate!
Far-wandering, alone, we know not where,
He found the white and purple poppies fair,
Nor heard the Summer pass importunate.

Ah, Love, can we forgive thy loitering?
The golden Summer, as a dream foregone
Is changed — till in our eyes the ashen dawn
Of Autumn kindles.* * * * We have heard thy wing
But with a sound of sighing; heart on heart,
In our own sighs we hear thy wing depart.

THE ABSENCE OF THE MUSE



O, Muse, where lingerest thou? In any land
Of Saturn, lit with moons and nenuphars?
Or in what high metropolis of Mars —
Hearing the gongs of dire, occult command,
And bugles blown from strand to unknown strand
Of continents embattled in old wars
That primal kings began? Or on the bars
Of ebbing seas in Venus, from the sand
Of shattered nacre with a thousand hues,
Dost pluck the blossoms of the purple wrack
And roses of blue coral for thy hair?
Or, flown beyond the roaring Zodiac,
Translatest thou the tale of earthly news
And earthly songs to singers of Altair?

DISSONANCE



The harsh, brief sob of broken horns; the sound
Of hammers, on some echoing sepulchre;
Lutes in a thunderstorm; a dulcimer
By sudden drums and clamouring bugles drowned;
Crackle of pearls, and gritting rubies, ground
Beneath an iron heel; the heavy whirr
Of battle wheels; a hungry leopard's purr,
And sigh of swords withdrawing from the wound — :

All, all are in thy dreadful fugue, O Life,
Thy dark, malign and monstrous music, spun
In hell, from a delirious Satan's dream!* * *

O! dissonance primordial and supreme —
The moan, the thunder, evermore at strife,
Beneath the unheeding silence of the sun!

TO NORA MAY FRENCH



Importunate, the lion-throated sea,
Blind with the mounting foam of winter, mourns
To cliffs where cling the wrenched and laboured roots
Of cypresses, and blossoms granite-grown
Lose in the gale their tattered petals, cast
On bleak, tumultuous cauldrons of the tide,
Where fell thy molten ashes.* * * * Past the bay,
The morning dunes a dust of marble seem —
Wrought from primeval fanes to Beauty reared,
And shattered by some vandal Titan's mace
To more than Time's own ruin. Woods of pine,
Above the dunes in Gothic gloom recede,
And climb the ridge that arches to the north
Long as a lolling dragon's chine. The gulls,
Like ashen leaves far-off upon the wind,
Flutter above the broad and smouldering sea,
That lightens with the fire-white foam: But thou,
Of whom the sea is urn and sepulcher,
Who hast thereof a blown, tumultuous sleep,
And stormy peace in gulfs impacable —
What carest thou if Beauty loiter there,
Clad with the crystal noon? What carest thou
If sharp and sudden balsams of the pine
Mingle for her in the air's bright thurible
With keener fragrance proffered by the deep

From riven gulfs resounding?* * * Knowest thou
What solemn shores of crocus-colored light,
Reared by the sunset in its realm of change,
Will mock the dream-lost isles that sirens ward,
And charm the icy emerald of the seas
To unabiding iris? Knowest thou
The waxing of the wan December foam —
A thunder-cloven veil that climbs and falls
Upon the cliffs forever?

Thou art still
As they that sleep in the eldest pyramid —
Or mounded with Mesopotamia
And immemorial deserts! Thou hast part
In the wordless, dumb conspiracy of death —
Silence wherein the warrior kings accord,
And all the wrangling sages! If thy voice
In any wise return, and word of thee,
It is a lost, incognizable sigh,
Upon the wind's oblivious woe, or blown,
Antiphonal, from wave to plangent wave
In the vast, unhuman sorrow of the main,
On tides that lave the city-laden shores
Of lands wherein the eternal vanities
Are served at many altars; tides that wash
Lemuria's unfathomable walls,
And idly sway the weed-involvèd oars
At wharves of lost Atlantis; tides that rise

From coral-coffered bones of all the drowned,
And sunless tombs of pearl that krakens guard.

II.

As none shall roam the sad Leucadian rock,
Above the sea's immitigable moan,
But in his heart a song that Sappho sang,
And flame-like murmur of the muted lyres
That time hath not extinguished, and the cry
Of nightingales two thousand years ago,
Shall mix with those remorseful chords that break
To endless foam and thunder; and he learn
The unsleeping woe that lives in Mytelene
Till wave and deep are dumb with ice, and rime
Hath paled the rose forever — even thus,
Daughter of Sappho, passion-souled and fair,
Whose face the lutes of Lesbos would have sung,
And white Errina followed — even thus,
The western wave is eloquent of thee,
And half the wine-like fragrance of the foam
Is attar of thy spirit, and the pines
From breasts of mournful, melancholy green,
Release remembered echoes of thy song
To airs importunate. No wraith of fog,
Twice-ghostly with the Hecatean moon,
Nor rack of blown, fantasmal spume shall rise,
But I will dream thy spirit walks the sea,
Unpacified with Lethe. Thou art grown

A part of all sad beauty, and my soul
Hath found thy buried sorrow in its own,
Inseparable forever. Moons that pass,
Immaculate, to solemn pyres of snow,
And meres whereon the broken lotus dies,
Are kin to thee, as wine-lipped autumn is,
With suns of swift, irreparable change,
And lucid evenings eager-starred. Of thee,
The pearlèd fountains tell, and winds that take
In one white swirl the petals of the plum,
And leave the branches lonely. Royal blooms
Of the magnolia, pale as Beauty's brow,
And foam-white myrtles, and the fiery, bright
Pome-granate flow'rs, will subtly speak of thee
While spring hath speech and meaning. Music hath
Her fugitive and uncommanded chords,
That thrill with tremors of thy mystery,
Or turn the void thy fleeing soul hath left
To murmurs inenarrable, that hold
Epiphanies of blind, conceiveless vision,
And things we dare not know, and dare not dream.

Note: Nora May French, the most gifted poet of her sex that America has produced, died by her own hand at Carmel in 1907. Her ashes were strewn into the sea from Point Lobos.

IN LEMURIA



Rememberest thou? Enormous gongs of stone
Were stricken, and the storming trumpeteers
Acclaimed my deed to answering tides of spears,
And spoke the names of monsters overthrown —
Griffins whose angry gold, and fervid store
Of sapphires wrenched from marble-plungèd mines —
Carnelians, opals, agates, almandines,
I brought to thee some scarlet eve of yore.

In the wide fane that shrined thee, Venus-wise,
The fallen clamours died.* * * * I heard the tune
Of tiny bells of pearl and melanite,
Hung at thy knees, and arms of dreamt delight;
And placed my wealth before thy fabled eyes,
Pallid and pure as jaspers from the moon.

RECOMPENSE



Ah, more to me than many days and many dreams
And more than every hope, or any memory,
This moment, when thy lips are laid immortally
On mine, and death and time are shadows of old dreams.

Now all the crownless, ruined years have recompense:
In one supreme, undying hour of light and fire,
The many moons and suns have found their one desire —
When in the hour of love, all life has recompense.

EXOTIQUE



Thy mouth is like a crimson orchid-flow'r,
Whence perfume and whence poison rise unseen
To moons aswim in iris or in green,
Or mix with morning in an eastern bow'r.

Thou shouldst have known, in amaranthine isles,
The sunsets hued like fire of frankincense,
Or the long noons enfraught with redolence,
The mingled spicery of purple miles.

Thy breasts, where blood and molten marble flow,
Thy warm white limbs, thy loins of tropic snow —
These, these, by which desire is grown divine,

Were made for dreams in mystic palaces,
For love, and sleep, and slow voluptuousness,
And summer seas a-foam like foaming wine.

TRANSCENDENCE



To look on love with disenamoured eyes;
To see with gaze relentless, rendered clear
Of hope or hatred, of desire and fear,
The insuperable nullity that lies
Behind the veils of various disguise
Which life or death may haply weave; to hear
Forevermore in flute and harp the mere
And all-resolving silence; recognize
The gules of autumn in the greening leaf,
And in the poppy-pod the poppy-flow'r —
This is to be the lord of love and grief,
O'er Time's illusion and thyself supreme,
As, half-aroused in some nocturnal hour,
The dreamer knows and dominates his dream.

SATIETY



Dear you were as is the tree of Being
To the happy dead in heaven's bow'rs.* * * *

Whence and what, this evil spell that flings me
Forth from love with loveless eyes unseeing?

Fair you were as nymph or queen of vision —
Bosomed like the succubi of dreams.* * * *

All your beauty turns to sad, ironic
Weariness, and sorrowful derision.

Lo, of what avail our spent caresses, —
Kisses that set the summer night aflame?* * * *

Mute, enormous languor without cause —
What is this my autumn heart confesses?

All your breast was fragrant like the flowers
Of the grape on hills toward the south.* * * *

Love is acrid now like staling asters,
Sodden with the rain of autumn hours.

THE MINISTERS OF LAW



The glories and the perils of thy day
Are one, O Man! Thou goest to thine end
With Pow'rs, and for a little thou dost wend
With marshalled Majesties upon their way:
But thee the dread Necessities betray
That nurse, and fearful Splendours that befriend;
And thee shall alien Dominations rend.* * * *

Deemest the triumph of the worlds to stay,
Or step by step eternal, unsurpassed,
Stride with the suns upon their road of awe?
Thou travelest brief ways that end and sink —
Urged by the hurrying planets; and the vast,
Prone-rushing constellations of the Law,
Thunder and press behind thee at the brink.

COLDNESS



Thy heart will not believe in love:
Therefore is love become to me
A dream, an empty mockery,
And death and life are less than love.

O, bright and beautiful as flame
Thy hair, and pale thy lips, and eyes
Like seas wherein the waning skies
Of autumn lie in paler flame.

Forevermore thy heart abides,
A dreaming crystal, pure and cold,
Amid whose visions manifold
No shape nor any shade abides.

Thy days are void and vain as death:
The moons and morrows weave for thee
A sleep of light eternally,
Where life is as a dream of death.

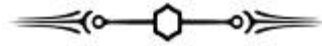
Chill as white jewels, or the moon,
And virginal as ice or fire,
Thou knowest life and life's desire
As a bright mirror knows the moon.

Lo, if thy heart believed in love,
It were not more nor less to me:

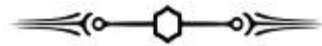
I know THY love a mockery,
And all my dreams less vain than love.

SONG OF SAPPHO'S ARABIAN DAUGHTER

OR



THE DESERT GARDEN



Dreaming, I said, “When she is come,
This desert garden that is me,
For her shall offer mellowly
Its myrrh and its olibanum —
When she is come.

“The flowers of the moon for her,
With blossoms of the sun shall bloom,
The fading roses breathe perfume,
The lightly fallen petals stir,
And sigh to her.

“Her presence, like a living wind
Each little leaf makes visible,
Shall enter there, or like the spell
(Upon the lulling leaves divined)
Of silent wind.”

* * * * *

Alas! for she is come and gone,
And in the garden, green for her,

The flowers fall, the flowers stir
Only to winds of night and dawn:
For she is gone.

THE CRUCIFIXION OF EROS



Because of thee, immortal Love hath died:
Because thy wilful heart will not believe,
Thy hands and mine a thorny crown must weave,
A thorny crown for Love the crucified.

Behold, how beautiful the limbs that bleed —
The limbs that bleed, O stubborn heart, for us!
Still are the lids so softly tremulous,
And mute the mouth of our eternal need.

* * * * *

Though this thy fearful lips would now deny,
Love is divine, and cannot wholly die:
Draw forth the nails thy tender hands have driven —

And we will know the mercy infinite,
Will find redemption in our own delight,
And in each other's heart the only heaven.

THE EXILE



Against my heart your heart is closed; you bid me go:
What ways are left in all the world for Love to know?
Desolate oceans, and the light of lonely plains,
Dead moons that wander in the wastes of ice and snow —

These, these I fain would see, and find the splendid bourne
Of sunset, or the brazen deserts of the morn,
That I might lose this ever-aching loneliness
In vaster solitude; and love be less forlorn,

Faring to seek with alien sun and alien star
The strange, the veiled horizons infinite and far;
Spaces of fire and night, the skies of steel and gold,
Or sunset-haunted seas where foamless islands are.

AVE ATQUE VALE



Black dreams; the pale and sorrowful desire
Whose eyes have looked on Lethe, and have seen,
Deep in the sliding ebon tide serene,
Their own vain light inverted; ashen fire,
With wasted lilies, late and languishing;
Autumnal roses blind with rain; slow foam
From desert-sinking seas, with honeycomb
Of aconite and poppy — these I bring
With this my bitter, barren love to thee;
And from the grievous springs of memory,
Far in the great Maremma of my heart,
I proffer thee to drink; and on thy mouth,
With the one kiss wherein we meet and part,
Leave fire and dust from quenchless leagues of drouth.

SOLUTION



The ghostly fire that walks the fen,
Tonight thine only light shall be;
On lethal ways thy soul shall pass,
And prove the stealthy, coiled morass,
With mocking mists for company.

On roads thou goest not again,
To shores where thou hast never gone, —
Fare onward, though the shuddering queach
And serpent-rippled waters reach
Like seepage-pools of Acheron,

Beside thee; and the twisten reeds,
Close-raddled as a witch's net,
Enwind thy knees, and cling and clutch
Like wreathing adders; though the touch
Of the blind air be dank and wet,

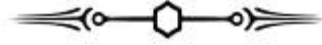
As from a wounded Thing that bleeds
In cloud and darkness overhead —
Fare onward, where thy dreams of yore
In splendour drape the fetid shore
And pestilential waters dead.

And though the toads' irrisation rise,
As grinding of Satanic racks,

And spectral willows, gaunt and grey,
Gibber along thy shrouded way,
Where vipers lie with livid backs,

And watch thee with their sulphurous eyes, —
Fare onward, till thy feet shall slip
Deep in the sudden pool ordained,
And all the noisome draught be drained,
That turns to Lethe on the lip.

THE TEARS OF LILITH



O lovely demon, half-divine!
Hemlock, and hydromel, and gall,
Honey, and aconite, and wine,
Mingle to make that mouth of thine —

Thy mouth I love: But most of all,
It is thy tears that I desire —
Thy tears, like fountain-drops that fall
In gardens red, Satanical;

Or like the tears of mist and fire,
Wept by the moon, that wizards use
To secret runes, when they require
Some silver philtre, sweet and dire.

A PRECEPT



With words of ivory,
Of bronze, of ebony,
Of alabaster, marble, steel, and gold,
The beauty of the visible is told.

But how with these express
The unseen Loveliness —
Splendour and light, and harmony, and sound,
The heart hath felt, the sense hath never found?

No shining words of stone —
Shadow and cloud alone —
These shall the poet seek eternally,
Whose lines would carve the mask of Mystery.

REMEMBERED LIGHT



The years are a falling of snow,
Slow, but without cessation,
On hills, and mountains, and flowers and worlds that were;
But snow, and the crawling night wherein it fell,
May be washed away in one swifter hour of flame:
Thus it was that some slant of sunset
In the chasms of piled cloud —
Transient mountains that made a new horizon,
Uplifting the west to fantastic pinnacles —
Smote warm in a buried realm of the spirit,
Till the snows of forgetfulness were gone.
Clear in the vistas of memory,
The peaks of a world long unremembered,
Soared further than clouds but fell not,
Based on hills that shook not nor melted
With that burden enormous, hardly to be believed.

Rent with stupendous chasms,
Full of an umber twilight,
I beheld that larger world;
Bright was the twilight, sharp like ethereal wine
Above, but low in the clefts it thickened,
Dull as with duskier tincture.
Like whimsical wings outspread but unstirring,
Flowers that seemed spirits of the twilight

That must pass with its passing —
Too fragile for day or for darkness,
Fed the dusk with more delicate hues than its own;
Stars that were nearer, more radiant than ours,
Quivered and pulsed in the clear thin gold of the sky.

These things I beheld
Till the gold was shaken with flight
Of fantastical wings like broken shadows,
Forerunning the darkness;
Till the twilight shivered with outcry of eldritch voices
Like pain's last cry ere oblivion.

SONG



I bring my weariness to thee,
My bitter dreams I bring;
Love with a wounded wing,
And life consumed of memory,
I bring to thee.

The haven of thy happy breast —
Of this my dreams are fain:
For all my weary pain,
In all the world there is no rest,
But on thy breast.

HAUNTING



There is no peace amid the moonlight and the pines;
Deep in the windless gloom the lamplike thought of you
Abides; and ah, what burning memories pursue
My heart among the pallid marbles!* * * Night assigns

Your silver face for wardress of the doors of Sleep;
Beyond the wild, last bourn of dreamland, lo, your eyes
Are on the lonesome, ultimate, undiscovered skies;
Moonlike and dim, you wander ever in the deep

Which is the secret, innermost, unknown abyss
Of my own soul, and in its night your spirit lives.* * * *

Shall I not find the very draught that Lethe gives,
Sweet with your tears, and warm with savour of your kiss?

THE HIDDEN PARADISE



Our passion is a secret Paradise —
Eden of lotos and the fruitful date,
With silence walled and held undesecrate
By man or prying seraph: We are wise

As any god and goddess, who have wrung
From roseal fruitage of a bough forbidden,
The happy wine we drink, we drink unhidden,
Deep in the vales where vernal leaves are young,

And the first poppies loiter.* * * * Though the breath
Of all the gods a bolted storm prepare,
And blood-red gloom of thunders blind the sun,

Shall we not turn, with clinging kisses there,
And, laughing, quaff some dreamless wine of death —
Triumphant still, in mere oblivion?

CLEOPATRA



Thy beauty is the warmth and languor and passion of a tropic autumn,
Caressing all the senses, —
With light from skies of heavy azure,
With perfume from hidden orchids many-hued
That burn in the berylline dusk of palms;
With the balmy kiss of tropic wind and wave,
And the songs of exotic birds that pass
In vermilion-flashing flight from isle to isle on a cobalt sea.* * *

O, sweetness in the inmost sense,
As of golden fruits that have grown by the waters of Lethe,
Or fragrance of purple lilies, crushed by the limbs of lovers,
In the shadow of a wood of cypress!* * *

Thou pervadest me with thy love,
As the dawn pervadeth a valley among mountains,
Or as opaline sunset filleth the amaranth-coloured sea;
The desire of thy heart is upon me,
As a myrtle-scented wind from the isle of Cythera,
Where Aphrodite waits for Adonis,
Lying naked among the flag lilies by a pool of chrysolite;
I inhale thy love
As the breath of hidden gardens of purple and scarlet,
Where Circe wanders,
Clad in a trailing gown whose colours are the gold of flame,
And the azure of the skies of autumn.

ECSTASY



Blind with your softly fallen hair,
I turn me from the twilight air;
And, ah, the wordless tale of love
My lips upon your lips declare!

High stars are on the shadowy south —
Unseen, unknown: The urgent drouth
Of desert years in one deep kiss,
Would drain the sweetness of your mouth.

Our straining arms that clasp and close,
Ache with an ecstasy that grows;
And passion in our secret veins,
Like burning amber, glows and glows.

This love is sweet to have and hold,
Better than sandalwood or gold,
After the barren, bitter loves,
The mad and mournful loves of old.

This love is fortunate and fair,
Behind its veil of fallen hair;
This love hath soft and clinging arms,
And a kind bosom, warm and bare.

UNION



As the fumes of myrrh that mix with the odour of sandalwood
In a temple sacred to the goddess Lakme;
As moonlight mingled with starlight
In the lucent azure of an autumn lake;
As the sunset-rays of gold and crimson
That interlace on a couch of purple cloud —
Even so, Beloved,
Hath my love mingled with thine —
Even so, our souls are one,
Like two winds that meet in a valley of rose and lotus,
And fall to rest, uniting
As the still and fragrant air that lingers
On a bed of falling petals.

PSALM



My beloved is a well of clear waters,
To which I have come at noontide,
From the land of the Abomination of Desolation,
From the lion-dreaded waste,
Where nothing dwelleth but the inconsolable crying of an evil wind,
And the wandering realms and cities of the wide mirage;
Where no one passeth except the sun,
Who walked like a terrible god through the hell of the brazen skies;
And the dreadful cohorts of the constellations,
Who pass remote in alien years,
And clad with icy azures of unattainable distance.

My beloved is a singing fountain,
Set in a wide oasis,
Between the frondage of the fruitful palm,
And the branches of the flowering myrtle:
The wind that bloweth thereon,
Hath lain in a vale of cassia and myrrh,
And caressed the vermilion blossoms of the pomegranate,
Whose red is the red of the lips of Astarte;
A thousand nightingales are gathered there,
From all the gardens of lost romance;
And plots of purple and silver lillies,
More beautiful than the meadows of mirage,

Revive the flowers of Sabeen queens,
And the blossoms worn by all the princesses of legend.* * *

Ah, suffer me to dwell
Thereby, and forget the gilded cities of desire,
The domes of spectral gold,
That fled from horizon to horizon
Before me, and left my feet in the sinking vales and shifting
 plains of the desert,
Whose waters are green with corruption,
And bitter with the dust and ashes of death.
Ah, suffer me to sleep
In the balsam-laden shadows of the palm and myrtle,
By the ever-springing fountain!

IN NOVEMBER



With autumn and the flaring leaves our love must end —
Ere flauntful spring shall mock thy tears and my despair
With blossoms red or pale, some April bride may wear:
Now, while the weary, grey, forgetful heavens bend

Above the grief and languor of the dying lands,
In one last kiss shall meet and mingle and expire
The muted, last, remembering sighs of our desire;
And on my face the flower-like burden of thy hands

Shall rest a little, and be taken tenderly,
And, ah, how lightly hence! And in thy golden eyes,
Thy love, and all the ashen glory of the skies,
Shall mingle, and as in a mirror lie for me.

SYMBOLS

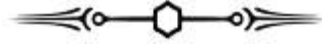


No more of gold and marble, nor of snow,
And sunlight, and vermillion, would I make
My vision and my symbols, nor would take
The auroral flame of some prismatic floe,
Nor iris of the frail and lunar bow,
Flung on the shafted waterfalls that wake
The night's blue slumber in a shadowy lake.* * *

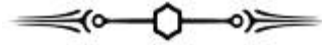
To body forth my fantasies, and show
Communicable mystery, I would find,
In adamantine darkness of the earth,
Metals untouched of any sun; and bring
Black azures of the nether sea to birth —
Or fetch the secret, splendid leaves, and blind,
Blue lilies of an Atlantean spring.

THE HASHISH-EATER

OR



THE APOCALYPSE OF EVIL



Bow down: I am the emperor of dreams;
I crown me with the million-coloured sun
Of secret worlds incredible, and take
Their trailing skies for vestment, when I soar,
Throned on the mounting zenith, and illumine
The spaceward-flown horizons infinite.
Like rampant monsters roaring for their glut,
The fiery-crested oceans rise and rise,
By jealous moons maleficiently urged
To follow me forever; mountains horned
With peaks of sharpest adamant, and mawed
With sulphur-lit volcanoes lava-langued,
Usurp the skies with thunder, but in vain;
And continents of serpent-shapen trees,
With slimy trunks that lengthen league by league,
Pursue my flight through ages spurned to fire
By that supreme ascendance. Sorcerers
And evil kings predominantly armed
With scrolls of fulvous dragon-skin, whereon
Are worm-like runes of ever-twisting flame,

Would stay me; and the sirens of the stars,
With foam-light songs from silver fragrance wrought,
Would lure me to their crystal reefs; and moons
Where viper-eyed, senescent devils dwell,
With antic gnomes abominably wise,
Heave up their icy horns across my way:
But naught deters me from the goal ordained
By suns, and aeons, and immortal wars,
And sung by moons and motes; the goal whose name
Is all the secret of forgotten glyphs,
By sinful gods in torrid rubies writ
For ending of a brazen book; the goal
Whereat my soaring ecstasy may stand,
In amplest heavens multiplied to hold
My hordes of thunder-vested avatars,
And Promethèan armies of my thought,
That brandish claspèd levins. There I call
My memories, intolerably clad
In light the peaks of paradise may wear,
And lead the Armageddon of my dreams,
Whose instant shout of triumph is become
Immensity's own music: For their feet
Are founded on innumerable worlds,
Remote in alien epochs, and their arms
Upraised, are columns potent to exalt
With ease ineffable the countless thrones
Of all the gods that are and gods to be,

Or bear the seats of Asmadai and Set
Above the seventh paradise.

Supreme

In culminant omniscience manifold,
And served by senses multitudinous,
Far-posted on the shifting walls of time,
With eyes that roam the star-unwinnowed fields
Of utter night and chaos, I convoke
The Babel of their visions, and attend
At once their myriad witness: I behold,
In Ombos, where the fallen Titans dwell,
With mountain-builed walls, and gulfs for moat,
The secret cleft that cunning dwarves have dug
Beneath an alp-like buttress; and I list,
Too late, the clang of adamantine gongs,
Dinned by their drowsy guardians, whose feet
Have felt the wasp-like sting of little knives,
Embrued with slobber of the basilisk,
Or juice of wounded upas. And I see,
In gardens of a crimson-litten world
The sacred flow'r with lips of purple flesh,
And silver-lashed, vermilion-lidded eyes
Of torpid azure; whom his furtive priests
At moonless eve in terror seek to slay,
With bubbling grails of sacrificial blood
That hide a hueless poison. And I read,
Upon the tongue of a forgotten sphinx,
The annulling word a spiteful demon wrote

With gall of slain chimeras; and I know
What pentacles the lunar wizards use,
That once allured the gulf-returning roc,
With ten great wings of furlèd storm, to pause
Midmost an alabaster mount; and there,
With boulder-weighted webs of dragons'-gut,
Uplift by cranes a captive giant built,
They wound the monstrous, moonquake-throbbing bird,
And plucked, from off his sabre-taloned feet,
Uranian sapphires fast in frozen blood,
With amethysts from Mars. I lean to read,
With slant-lipped mages, in an evil star,
The monstrous archives of a war that ran
Through wasted aeons, and the prophecy
Of wars renewed, that shall commemorate
Some enmity of wivern-headed kings,
Even to the brink of time. I know the blooms
Of bluish fungus, freaked with mercury,
That bloat within the craters of the moon,
And in one still, selenic hour have shrunk
To pools of slime and feter; and I know
What clammy blossoms, blanched and cavern-grown,
Are proffered in Uranus to their gods
By mole-eyed peoples; and the livid seed
Of some black fruit a king in Saturn ate,
Which, cast upon his tinkling palace-floor,
Took root between the burnished flags, and now
Hath mounted, and become a hellish tree,

Whose lithe and hairy branches, lined with mouths,
Net like a hundred ropes his lurching throne,
And strain at starting pillars. I behold
The slowly-thronging corals, that usurp
Some harbour of a million-masted sea,
And sun them on the league-long wharves of gold —
Bulks of enormous crimson, kraken-limbed
And kraken-headed, lifting up as crowns
The octiremes of perished emperors,
And galleys fraught with royal gems, that sailed
From a sea-deserted haven.

Swifter grow

The visions: Now a mighty city looms,
Hewn from a hill of purest cinnabar,
To domes and turrets like a sunrise thronged
With tier on tier of captive moons, half-drowned
In shifting erubescence. But whose hands
Were sculptors of its doors, and columns wrought
To semblance of prodigious blooms of old,
No eremite hath lingered there to say,
And no man comes to learn: For long ago
A prophet came, warning its timid king
Against the plague of lichens that had crept
Across subverted empires, and the sand
Of wastes that Cyclopean mountains ward;
Which, slow and ineluctable, would come,
To take his fiery bastions and his fanes,
And quench his domes with greenish tetter. Now

I see a host of naked giants, armed
With horns of behemoth and unicorn,
Who wander, blinded by the clinging spells
Of hostile wizardry, and stagger on
To forests where the very leaves have eyes,
And ebonies like wrathful dragons roar
To teaks a-chuckle in the loathly gloom;
Where coiled lianas lean, with serried fangs,
From writhing palms with swollen boles that moan;
Where leeches of a scarlet moss have sucked
The eyes of some dead monster, and have crawled
To bask upon his azure-spotted spine;
Where hydra-throated blossoms hiss and sing,
Or yawn with mouths that drip a sluggish dew,
Whose touch is death and slow corrosion. Then,
I watch a war of pigmies, met by night,
With pitter of their drums of parrot's hide,
On plains with no horizon, where a god
Might lose his way for centuries; and there,
In wreathèd light, and fulgors all convolved,
A rout of green, enormous moons ascend,
With rays that like a shivering venom run
On inch-long swords of lizard-fang.

Surveyed

From this my throne, as from a central sun,
The pageantries of worlds and cycles pass;
Forgotten splendours, dream by dream unfold,
Like tapestry, and vanish; violet suns,

Or suns of changeful iridescence, bring
Their rays about me, like the coloured lights
Imploring priests might lift to glorify
The face of some averted god; the songs
Of mystic poets in a purple world,
Ascend to me in music that is made
From unconceived perfumes, and the pulse
Of love ineffable; the lute-players
Whose lutes are strung with gold of the utmost moon,
Call forth delicious languors, never known
Save to their golden kings; the sorcerers
Of hooded stars inscrutable to God,
Surrender me their demon-wrested scrolls,
Inscribed with lore of monstrous alchemies,
And awful transformations.* * * If I will,
I am at once the vision and the seer,
And mingle with my ever-streaming pomps,
And still abide their suzerain: I am
The neophyte who serves a nameless god,
Within whose fane the fanes of Hecatompilos
Were arks the Titan worshippers might bear,
Or flags to pave the threshold; or I am
The god himself, who calls the fleeing clouds
Into the nave where suns might congregate,
And veils the darkling mountain of his face
With fold on solemn fold; for whom the priests
Amass their monthly hecatomb of gems —
Opals that are a camel-cumbering load,

And monstrous alabraundines, won from war
With realms of hostile serpents; which arise,
Combustible, in vapours many-hued,
And myrrh-excelling perfumes. It is I,
The king, who holds with scepter-dropping hand
The helm of some great barge of chrysolite,
Sailing upon an amethystine sea
To isles of timeless summer: For the snows
Of hyperborean winter, and their winds,
Sleep in his jewel-built capital,
Nor any charm of flame-wrought wizardry,
Nor conjured suns may rout them; so he flees,
With captive kings to urge his serried oars,
Hopeful of dales where amaranthine dawn
Hath never left the faintly sighing lote
And fields of lispings moly. Or I fare,
Impanoplied with azure diamond,
As hero of a quest Achernar lights,
To deserts filled with ever-wandering flames,
That feed upon the sullen marl, and soar
To wrap the slopes of mountains, and to leap,
With tongues intolerably lengthening,
That lick the blenchèd heavens. But there lives
(Secure as in a garden walled from wind)
A lonely flower by a placid well,
Midmost the flaring tumult of the flames,
That roar as roars the storm-possessèd sea,
Implacable forever: And within

That simple grail the blossom lifts, there lies
One drop of an incomparable dew,
Which heals the parchèd weariness of kings,
And cures the wound of wisdom. I am page
To an emperor who reigns ten thousand years,
And through his labyrinthine palace-rooms,
Through courts and colonnades and balconies
Wherein immensity itself is mazed,
I seek the golden gorget he hath lost,
On which the names of his conniving stars
Are writ in little sapphires; and I roam
For centuries, and hear the brazen clocks
Innumeraably clang with such a sound
As brazen hammers make, by devils dinned
On tombs of all the dead; and nevermore
I find the gorget, but at length I find
A sealèd room whose nameless prisoner
Moans with a nameless torture, and would turn
To hell's red rack as to a lilied couch
From that whereon they stretched him; and I find,
Prostrate upon a lotus-painted floor,
The loveliest of all beloved slaves
My emperor hath, and from her pulseless side
A serpent rises, whiter than the root
Of some venefic bloom in darkness grown,
And gazes up with green-lit eyes that seem
Like drops of cold, congealing poison.* * *

Hark!

What word was whispered in a tongue unknown,
In crypts of some impenetrable world?
Whose is the dark, dethroning secrecy
I cannot share, though I am king of suns
And king therewith of strong eternity,
Whose gnomons with their swords of shadow guard
My gates, and slay the intruder? Silence loads
The wind of ether, and the worlds are still
To hear the word that flees me. All my dreams
Fall like a rack of fuming vapours raised
To semblance by a necromant, and leave
Spirit and sense unthinkably alone,
Above a universe of shrouded stars,
And suns that wander, cowed with sullen gloom,
Like witches to a Sabbath.* * * Fear is born
In crypts below the nadir, and hath crawled
Reaching the floor of space and waits for wings
To lift it upward, like a hellish worm
Fain for the flesh of seraphs. Eyes that gleam,
But are not eyes of suns or galaxies,
Gather and throng to the base of darkness; flame
Behind some black, abysmal curtain burns,
Implacable, and fanned to whitest wrath
By raised wings that flail the whiffled gloom,
And make a brief and broken wind that moans,
As one who rides a throbbing rack. There is
A Thing that crouches, worlds and years remote,

Whose horns a demon sharpens, rasping forth
A note to shatter the donjon-keeps of time,
And crack the sphere of crystal.* * * All is dark
For ages, and my tolling heart suspends
Its clamour, as within the clutch of death,
Tightening with tense, hermetic rigours. Then,
In one enormous, million-flashing flame,
The stars unveil, the suns remove their cowls,
And beam to their responding planets; time
Is mine once more, and armies of its dreams
Rally to that insuperable throne,
Firmed on the central zenith.

Now I seek
The meads of shining moly I had found
In some remoter vision, by a stream
No cloud hath ever tarnished; where the sun,
A gold Narcissus, loiters evermore
Above his golden image: But I find
A corpse the ebbing water will not keep,
With eyes like sapphires that have lain in hell,
And felt the hissing embers; and the flow'rs
About me turn to hooded serpents, swayed
By flutes of devils in a hellish dance,
Meet for the nod of Satan, when he reigns
Above the raging Sabbath, and is wooed
By sarabands of witches. But I turn
To mountains guarding with their horns of snow
The source of that befoulèd rill, and seek

A pinnacle where none but eagles climb,
And they with failing pennons. But in vain
I flee, for on that pylon of the sky,
Some curse hath turned the unprinted snow to flame —
Red fires that curl and cluster to my tread,
Trying the summit's narrow cirque. And now,
I see a silver python far beneath —
Vast as a river that a fiend hath witched,
And forced to flow remèant in its course
To fountains whence it issued. Rapidly
It winds from slope to crumbling slope, and fills
Ravines and chasmal gorges, till the crags
Totter with coil on coil incumbent. Soon
It hath entwined the pinnacle I keep,
And gapes with a fanged, unfathomable maw,
Wherein great Typhon, and Enceladus,
Were orts of daily glut. But I am gone,
For at my call a hippogriff hath come,
And firm between his thunder-beating wings,
I mount the sheer cerulean walls of noon,
And see the earth, a spurnèd pebble, fall
Lost in the fields of nether stars — and seek
A planet where the outwearied wings of time
Might pause and furl for respite, or the plumes
Of death be stayed, and loiter in reprieve
Above some deathless lily: For therein,
Beauty hath found an avatar of flow'rs —
Blossoms that clothe it as a coloured flame,

From peak to peak, from pole to sullen pole,
And turn the skies to perfume. There I find
A lonely castle, calm and unbeset,
Save by the purple spears of amaranth,
And tender-sworded iris. Walls upbuilt
Of flushèd marble, wonderful with rose,
And domes like golden bubbles, and minarets
That take the clouds as coronal — these are mine,
For voiceless looms the peaceful barbican,
And the heavy-teethed portcullis hangs aloft
As if to smile a welcome. So I leave
My hippogriff to crop the magic meads,
And pass into a court the lilies hold,
And tread them to a fragrance that pursues
To win the portico, whose columns, carved
Of lazuli and amber, mock the palms
Of bright, Aidennic forests — capitalled
With fronds of stone fretted to airy lace,
Enfolding drupes that seem as tawny clusters
Of breasts of unknown houris; and convolved
With vines of shut and shadowy-leavèd flow'rs,
Like the dropt lids of women that endure
Some loin-dissolving rapture. Through a door
Enlaid with lilies twined luxuriously,
I enter, dazed and blinded with the sun,
And hear, in gloom that changing colours cloud,
A chuckle sharp as crepitating ice,
Upheaved and cloven by shoulders of the damned

Who strive in Antenora. When my eyes
Undazzle, and the cloud of colour fades,
I find me in a monster-guarded room,
Where marble apes with wings of griffins crowd
On walls an evil sculptor wrought, and beasts
Wherein the sloth and vampire-bat unite,
Pendulous by their toes of tarnished bronze,
Usurp the shadowy interval of lamps
That hang from ebon arches. Like a ripple,
Borne by the wind from pool to sluggish pool
In fields where wide Cocytus flows his bound,
A crackling smile around that circle runs,
And all the stone-wrought gibbons stare at me
With eyes that turn to glowing coals. A fear
That found no name in Babel, flings me on,
Breathless and faint with horror, to a hall
Within whose weary, self-reverting round,
The languid curtains, heavier than palls,
Unnumerably depict a weary king,
Who fain would cool his jewel-crusted hands
In lakes of emerald evening, or the fields
Of dreamless poppies pure with rain. I flee
Onward, and all the shadowy curtains shake
With tremors of a silken-sighing mirth,
And whispers of the innumerable king,
Breathing a tale of ancient pestilence,
Whose very words are vile contagion. Then
I reach a room where caryatids,

Carved in the form of tall, voluptuous Titan women,
Surround a throne of flowering ebony
Where creeps a vine of crystal. On the throne,
There lolls a wan, enormous Worm, whose bulk,
Tumid with all the rottenness of kings,
O'erflows its arms with fold on creased fold
Of fat obscenely bloating. Open-mouthed
He leans, and from his throat a score of tongues,
Depending like to wreaths of torpid vipers,
Drivel with phosphorescent slime, that runs
Down all his length of soft and monstrous folds,
And creeping among the flow'rs of ebony,
Lends them the life of tiny serpents. Now,
Ere the Horror ope those red and lashless slits
Of eyes that draw the gnat and midge, I turn,
And follow down a dusty hall, whose gloom,
Lined by the statues with their mighty limbs,
Ends in a golden-roofed balcony
Sphering the flowered horizon.

Ere my heart
Hath hushed the panic tumult of its pulses,
I listen, from beyond the horizon's rim,
A mutter faint as when the far simoon,
Mounting from unknown deserts, opens forth,
Wide as the waste, those wings of torrid night
That fling the doom of cities from their folds,
And musters in its van a thousand winds,
That with disrooted palms for besoms, rise

And sweep the sands to fury. As the storm,
Approaching, mounts and loudens to the ears
Of them that toil in fields of sesame,
So grows the mutter, and a shadow creeps
Above the gold horizon, like a dawn
Of darkness climbing sunward. Now they come,
A Sabbath of abominable shapes,
Led by the fiends and lamiae of worlds
That owned my sway aforetime! Cockatrice,
Python, tragelaphus, leviathan,
Chimera, martichoras, behemoth,
Geryon and sphinx, and hydra, on my ken
Arise as might some Afrite-built city,
Consummate in the lifting of a lash,
With thundrous domes and sounding obelisks,
And towers of night and fire alternate! Wings
Of white-hot stone along the hissing wind,
Bear up the huge and furnace-hearted beasts
Of hells beyond Rutilicus; and things
Whose lightless length would mete the gyre of moons —
Born from the caverns of a dying sun,
Uncoil to the very zenith, half disclosed
From gulfs below the horizon; octopi
Like blazing moons with countless arms of fire,
Climb from the seas of ever-surgings flame
That roll and roar through planets unconsumed,
Beating on coasts of unknown metals; beasts
That range the mighty worlds of Alioth, rise,

Aforesting the heavens with multitudinous horns,
Within whose maze the winds are lost; and borne
On cliff-like brows of plunging scolopendras,
The shell-wrought tow'rs of ocean-witches loom,
And griffin-mounted gods, and demons throned
On sable dragons, and the cockodrills
That bear the spleenful pygmies on their backs;
And blue-faced wizards from the worlds of Saiph,
On whom Titanic scorpions fawn; and armies
That move with fronts reverted from the foe,
And strike athwart their shoulders at the shapes
Their shields reflect in crystal; and eidola
Fashioned within unfathomable caves
By hands of eyeless peoples; and the blind
And worm-shaped monsters of a sunless world,
With krakens from the ultimate abyss,
And Demogorgons of the outer dark,
Arising, shout with multitudinous thunders,
And threatening me with dooms ineffable
In words whereat the heavens leap to flame,
Advance on the magic palace! Thrown before,
For league on league, their blasting shadows blight
And eat like fire the amaranthine meads,
Leaving an ashen desert! In the palace,
I hear the apes of marble shriek and howl.
And all the women-shapen columns moan,
Babbling with unknown terror. In my fear,
A monstrous dread unnamed in any hell,

I rise, and flee with the fleeing wind for wings,
And in a trice the magic palace reels,
And spiring to a single tow'r of flame,
Goes out, and leaves nor shard nor ember! Flown
Beyond the world, upon that fleeing wind,
I reach the gulf's irrespirable verge,
Where fails the strongest storm for breath and fall,
Supportless, through the nadir-plunged gloom,
Beyond the scope and vision of the sun,
To other skies and systems. In a world
Deep-wooded with the multi-coloured fungi,
That soar to semblance of fantastic palms,
I fall as falls the meteor-stone, and break
A score of trunks to powder. All unhurt,
I rise, and through the illimitable woods,
Among the trees of flimsy opal, roam,
And see their tops that clamber, hour by hour,
To touch the suns of iris. Things unseen,
Whose charnel breath informs the tideless air
With spreading pools of fetor, follow me
Elusive past the ever-changing palms;
And pittering moths, with wide and ashen wings,
Flit on before, and insects ember-hued,
Descending, hurtle through the gorgeous gloom,
And quench themselves in crumbling thickets. Heard
Far-off, the gong-like roar of beasts unknown
Resounds at measured intervals of time,
Shaking the riper trees to dust, that falls

In clouds of acrid perfume, stifling me
Beneath a pall of iris.

Now the palms
Grow far apart and lessen momentarily
To shrubs a dwarf might topple. Over them
I see an empty desert, all ablaze
With amethysts and rubies, and the dust
Of garnets or carnelians. On I roam,
Treading the gorgeous grit, that dazzles me
With leaping waves of endless rutilance,
Whereby the air is turned to a crimson gloom,
Through which I wander, blind as any Kobold;
Till underfoot the griding sands give place
To stone or metal, with a massive ring
More welcome to mine ears than golden bells,
Or tinkle of silver fountains. When the gloom
Of crimson lifts, I stand upon the edge
Of a broad black plain of adamant, that reaches,
Level as a windless water, to the verge
Of all the world; and through the sable plain,
A hundred streams of shattered marble run,
And streams of broken steel, and streams of bronze,
Like to the ruin of all the wars of time,
To plunge, with clangour of timeless cataracts,
Adown the gulfs eternal.

So I follow,
Between a river of steel and a river of bronze,
With ripples loud and tuneless as the clash

Of a million lutes; and come to the precipice
From which they fall, and make the mighty sound
Of a million swords that meet a million shields,
Or din of spears and armour in the wars
Of all the worlds and aeons: Far beneath,
They fall, through gulfs and cycles of the void,
And vanish like a stream of broken stars,
Into the nether darkness; nor the gods
Of any sun, nor demons of the gulf,
Will dare to know what everlasting sea
Is fed thereby, and mounts forevermore
With mighty tides unebbing.

Lo, what cloud,
Or night of sudden and supreme eclipse,
Is on the suns of opal? At my side,
The rivers rail with a wan and ghostly gleam,
Through darkness falling as the night that falls
From mighty spheres extinguished! Turning now,
I see, betwixt the desert and the suns,
The poised wings of all the dragon-rout,
Far-flown in black occlusion thousand-fold
Through stars, and deeps, and devastated worlds,
Upon my trail of terror! Griffins, rocs,
And sluggish, dark chimeras, heavy-winged
After the ravin of dispeopled lands,
With harpies, and the vulture-birds of hell —
Hot from abominable feasts and fain
To cool their beaks and talons in my blood —

All, all have gathered, and the wingless rear,
With rank on rank of foul, colossal Worms,
Like pillars of embattled night and flame,
Looms on the wide horizon! From the van,
I hear the shriek of wyvers, loud and shrill
As tempests in a broken fane, and roar
Of sphinxes, like the unrelenting toll
Of bells from tow'rs infernal. Cloud on cloud,
They arch the zenith, and a dreadful wind
Falls from them like the wind before the storm.
And in the wind my cloven garment streams,
And flutters in the face of all the void,
Even as flows a flaffing spirit, lost
On the Pit's undying tempest! Louder grows
The thunder of the streams of stone and bronze. —
Redoubled with the roar of torrent wings,
Inseparably mingled. Scarce I keep
My footing, in the gulfward winds of fear,
And mighty thunders, beating to the void
In sea-like waves incessant; and would flee
With them, and prove the nadir-founded night
Where fall the streams of ruin; but when I reach
The verge, and seek through sun-defeating gloom,
To measure with my gaze the dread descent,
I see a tiny star within the depths —
A light that stays me, while the wings of doom
Convene their thickening thousands: For the star
Increases, taking to its hueless orb,

With all the speed of horror-changed dreams
The light as of a million million moons;
And floating up through gulfs and glooms eclipsed,
It grows and grows, a huge white eyeless Face,
That fills the void and fills the universe,
And bloats against the limits of the world
With lips of flame that open.* * * *

THE SORROW OF THE WINDS



O winds that pass uncomforted
Through all the peacefulness of spring,
And tell the trees your sorrowing,
That they must mourn till ye are fled!

Think ye the Tyrian distance holds
The crystal of unquestioned sleep?
That those forgetful purples keep
No veiled, contentious greens and golds?

Half with communicated grief,
Half that they are not free to pass
With you across the flickering grass,
Mourns each inclined bough and leaf.

And I, with soul disquieted,
Shall find within the haunted spring
No peace, till your strange sorrowing
Is down the Tyrian distance fled.

ARTEMIS



In the green and flowerless garden I have dreamt,
Lying beneath perennial moons apart,
Whose cypress-built bowr's
And ivy-plighted myrtles none shall part;

In the funereal maze of larch and laurel,
Across white lawns, athwart the spectral mountains,
Seen through the sighing haze
Of all the high and moon-suspended fountains;

With feet enshaded by the fruitless green
Of summer trees that bear no summer blossom;
With wintry lusters laid
Upon the mounded marble of thy bosom,

Thou dost await, O mournful, enigmatic
Image of love-bewildered Artemis,
Whose tender lips too late,
Or all too soon, have sought the wounding kiss.

LOVE IS NOT YOURS, LOVE IS NOT MINE



Love is not yours, love is not mine:
It is the tranquil twilight heaven
Through which our pauseless feet are driven
Into the vast and desert noon.

Love is not mine, love is not yours:
It is a flying fire that passes,
Perishing on the blind morasses,
After the frail and perished moon.

THE CITY IN THE DESERT



In a lost land, that only dreams have known,
Where flaming suns walk naked and alone;
Among horizons bright as molten brass,
And glowing heavens like furnaces of glass,
It rears, with dome and tower manifold,
Rich as a dawn of amaranth and gold,
Or gorgeous as the Phoenix, born of fire,
And soaring from an opalescent pyre,
Sheer to the zenith. Like some anademe
Of Titan jewels turned to flame and dream,
The city crowns the far horizon-light,
Over the flowered meads of damassin.* * *

A desert isle of madreperl! wherein
The thurifer and opal-fruited palm,
And heaven-thronging minarets becalm
The seas of azure wind.* * * *

NOTE: These lines were remembered out of a dream, and are given
verbatim.

THE MELANCHOLY POOL



Marked by that priesthood of the Night's misrule,
The shadow-cowled, imprecatory trees —
Cypress that guarded woodland secrecies
And graves that waited the delaying ghoul,
Nathless I neared the melancholy pool,
Chief care of all, but closelier sentinelled
By those whose roots were deepest in dead Eld.
Where the thwart-woven boughs were wet and cool,
As with a mist of poison, I drew near,
To mark the tired stars peer dimly down
Through riven branches from the height of space,
And shudder in those waters with quick fear,
Where in black deeps the pale moon seemed to drown —
A haggard girl, with dead, despairing face.

THE MIRRORS OF BEAUTY



Beauty hath many mirrors: multifold
In ocean, or the foam, the gem, the dew,
Or well and rivulet, her eyes renew
With moon or sun their glories bright or cold, —
Whether in nights the ruby planets hold,
Or with the sombre light and icy hue
Of skies Decembral, or the autumn's blue,
Or dawn or evening of the vernal gold.

Often, upon the solitary sea,
She lieth, ere the wind shall gather breath —
One with the reflex of infinity.
In pools profounder for the twilight sky,
Her vision dwells, or in the poet's eye,
Or the black crystal of the eyes of Death.

WINTER MOONLIGHT



The silence of the silver night
Lies visibly upon the pines;
In marble flame the moon declines
Where spectral mountains dream in light.

And pale as with eternal sleep,
The enchanted valleys, far and strange,
Extend forever without change
Beneath the veiling splendours deep.

Carven of steel or fretted stone,
One stark and leafless autumn tree
With shadows made of ebony,
Leans on the moon-ward field alone.

TO THE BELOVED



Green suns, and suns of garnet I have known —
Turning, with suns that mock the sapphire-gem,
The constellated moons that mirror them
To ever-changing opals. On the flown
Horizons I have followed, all alone,
To meadows of mirage the deserts hem,
And sought to break the ghostly, golden stem
Of roses of illusion, briefly blown
By evanescent waters. One by one,
The outward ways of wonder I have trod
Through alien lives ineffable. But none
Hath held the troublous marvel and surprise
That gleams and trembles in thy slightest nod,
Or sleeps between thy eyelids and thine eyes.

REQUIESCAT



What was Love's worth,
Who lived with the roses? —
Love that is earth,
And with earth reposes!

What was Love's wonder? —
Scent of the flow'rs
After the thunder,
Thunder, and show'rs!

What were the breathless
Words that he said? —
Love that was deathless,
Love that is dead!

* * * * *

Echo hath taken
The song, and flown;
None shall awaken
Music and moan.

Buds and the flower,
All that Love found,
Last but an hour
Strewn on his mound.

MIRAGE



Deem ye the veiling vision will abide —
The marvel, and the glamour, and the dream,
Which lies in light upon the barren world?

* * * * *

The wings of Phoenix towering to the sun,
Nor opals, nor the morning foam, may hold
The hueful flame that as from faery moons
Is mirrored on the sand; where many a time,
From fields that hem with golden asphodel
A river like a dragon coiled in light,
Rise to the noon the hovering minarets
And soaring walls of cities Ilion-like,
Till the dim winds are hung with palaces
Of orient madreperl.

Forever lost —
Like sunset on a land of old romance, —
The splendour fails, and leaves the traveller
In endless deserts flaming to the day.

INHERITANCE



On all the sovereignty thine eyes obtain,
Thy grant of vision from the royal sun,
And all thine appanage of lordly dream,
The Dust, wherewith the worm is parcener,
Waits with perennial claim, nor will resign
Its right in thee: All glories and all gleams,
The seven splendours that inform the light,
And beauties immemorial as the moon,
Robing the barren world — all which thine eyes
Hold for inheritance, at length shall fill
The blindness and oblivion of the grave,
And leave it dark.* * * *

With dustiness and night
Upon thy mouth of starry proud desire,
With slumber for thy dreams, thou wilt repose,
Nor startle when the lazy, loitering Worm
Is slow to leave the tavern of thy brain.

AUTUMNAL



In all the pleasancess where Love was lord,
Blossom the mournful immortelles alone;
The fallen roses crumble, and are blown,
A snow of red, about the barren sward.

The misty sun is grown a dimmer gold:
Only the leaves, the leaves forever seem
To tell and treasure, in a gorgeous dream,
The aureate fervour of the dawns of old.

Only for us remains the memory
Of sultry moons and summer suns that were;
And we have found, where fallen roses stir,
The immortelles that flower mournfully.

CHANT OF AUTUMN



Like the voice of a golden star,
Heard from afar,
Perishing beauty calls
Out of the mist and rain;
Like the song of a silver wind,
When the night is blind,
Murmuring music falls,
Never to rise again.

Voice of the leaves that die,
Whisper and sigh
Of ruinous gardens waning
Rose by ungathered rose!
Dolour of pines immortal,
That guard the portal
Of a lonely mead retaining
Blossoms that no man knows!

Voices of love and the autumn sun —
In my heart ye are one!
Fairer the petals that fall,
Dearer the beauty that dies,
And the pyres of autumn burning,
Than a thousand springs returning.* * *

O, perishing loves that call
In my heart and the hollow skies!

ECHO OF MEMNON



I wandered ere the dream was done
Where over Nilus' nenuphars,
With all its ears of quivering stars,
The darkness listened for the sun.

Ere shadows were, ere night was gone,
I found the one whom suns had sought,
And waiting at his feet, methought
Had speech with Memnon in the dawn.* * * *

Sad as the last, lamenting star,
He sang, and clear as morning's gold:
Unto his voice I saw unfold
The hesitant, pale nenuphar.

But dolorous like the peal of dooms,
And proclamation of the night,
The waste returned that voice of light
With echo from its hollow tombs!

TWILIGHT ON THE SNOW



Before the hill's high altar bowed
The trees are Druids, weird and white,
Facing the vision of the light
With ancient lips to silence vowed.

No certain sound the woods aver,
Nor motion save of formless wings —
Filled with faint twilight flutterings,
With thronging gloom, and shadow-stir.

And hidden in a hollow dell,
Lie all the winds that magic trees
Have lulled with crystal wizardries,
And bound about with Merlin-spell.

IMAGE



Calm as a long-forgotten marble god who smiles,
Colossal, in the grim serenity of stone,
Upon the broken pillars lying all alone,
Athwart the horizon's infinite and yellow miles;

Whom neither desert darkness nor the desert noon,
Nor dawns that render terrible the bare dead land,
Nor winds that wrap his mighty form in palls of sand,
Nor the Medusa of the dumb and stony moon,

Shall evermore dismay, nor lion, nor the lynx,
With silken-sheathèd claws, and eyes of golden glede;
Nor any griffin, from the gates of treasure freed
To roam the gulf, nor any wild and wandering sphinx: —

Even thus, amid the waste of all fair things that were,
Of high marmoreal dreams immense and overthrown,
I wait forever, and about my face is blown
The sand of crumbling cenotaph and sepulcher.

THE REFUGE OF BEAUTY



From regions of the sun's half-dreamt decay,
All day the cruel rain strikes darkly down;
And from the night thy fatal stars shall frown —
Beauty, wilt thou abide this night and day?

Roofless, at portals dark and desperate,
Wilt thou a shelter unrefused implore,
And past the tomb's too-hospitable door,
Evade thy lover, in eluding Hate?

* * * * *

Alas, for what have I to offer thee? —
Chill halls of mind, dark rooms of memory
Where thou shalt dwell with woes and thoughts infirm;

This rumour-throngèd citadel of Sense,
Trembling before some nameless Imminence;
And fellow-guestship with the glutless Worm.

NIGHTMARE



As though a thousand vampires, from the day
Fleeing unseen, oppressed that nightly deep,
The straitening and darkened skies of sleep
Closed on the dreamland dale in which I lay.

Eternal tensions numbed the wings of Time,
While through the unending narrow ways I sought
Awakening; up precipitous gloom I thought
To reach the dawn, far-pinnacled sublime.

Rejected at the closen gates of light
I turned, and down new dreams and shadows fled,
Where beetling Shapes of veiled, colossal dread
With Gothic wings enormous arched the night.

THE MUMMY



From out the light of many a mightier day,
From Pharaonic splendour, Memphian gloom,
And from the night aeonian of the tomb
They brought him forth, to meet the modern ray, —
Upon his brow the unbroken seal of clay,
While gods have gone to a forgotten doom,
And desolation and the dust assume
Temple and cot immingling in decay.

From out the everlasting womb sublime
Of cyclopean death, within a land
Of tombs and cities rotting in the sun,
He is reborn to mock the might of time,
While kings have built against Oblivion
With walls and columns of the windy sand.

FORGETFULNESS



MY LIFE IS less than any broken glass.* * * *

My long and weary love, thy lips unwon —
All, all is turned to mere oblivion,
With the grey flowers and the fallen grass
Of yesteryear. And on the winds that pass,
Thy music and thy memory are one;
For thy wan face, desired above the sun,
Only some languid echo saith Alas.* * *

Love is no more, immemorably flown
As any leaf or petal.* * *But to me,
The very fields are still, and strange, and lone:
The forest and the garden fail for breath,
Where the dumb heavens hold implacably
An autumn like the marble sleep of death.

FLAMINGOES



On skies of tropic evening, broad and beryl-green,
Above a tranquil sea of molten malachite,
With flare of scarlet wings, in long and level flight,
The soundless, fleet flamingoes pass to isles unseen.

They pass and disappear, where darkening palms indent
The horizon, underneath some high and tawny star —
Lost in the sunset gulfs of glowing cinnabar,
Where sinks the painted moon, with prows of orpiment.

THE CHIMAERA



O, who will slay the last chimaera, Time?
Though Love and Death have many a cunning dart —
Despite of these, and close-wrought webs of Art,
And Slumber, with a slow Lethean lime —

Still, still, he lives; and though thy feet attain
The lunar peaks of ice and crystal, he,
Some night of agonized eternity
With brazen teeth shall gnaw thy fretted brain.

Gorged with the dust of thrones and fanes destroyed —
With lidless eyes like moons of adamant,
And vaulted mouth emportalling the void,

He crouches like a passive sphinx before
Some temple gate, or, grinning, moves to grant
Thine entrance at the monarch's golden door.

SATAN UNREPENTANT



Lost from those archangelic thrones that star,
Fadeless and fixed, heaven's light of azure bliss;
Rejected of His splendour and depressed
Beyond the birth of the first sun, and lower
Than the last star's decline, I here endure,
Abased, majestic, fallen, beautiful,
And unregretful in the doubted dark,
Throneless, that greatens chaos-ward, albeit
From chanting stars that throng the nave of night
Lost echoes wander here, and of his praise,
With ringing moons for cymbals dinned afar,
And shouted from the flaming mouths of suns.

The shadows of impalpable blank deeps —
Deep upon deep accumulate — close down,
Around my head concentered, while above,
In the lit, loftier blue, star after star
Spins endless orbits betwixt me and heaven;
And at my feet mysterious Chaos breaks,
Abrupt, immeasurable. Round His throne
Now throbs the rhythmic resonance of suns,
Incessant, perfect, music infinite:
I, throneless, hear the discords of the dark,
And roar of ruin uncreate, than which

Some vast cacophony of dragons, heard
In wasted worlds, were purer melody.

The universe His tyranny constrains
Turns on: In old and consummated gulfs
The stars that wield His judgment wait at hand,
And in new deeps Apocalyptic suns
Prepare His coming: Lo, His mighty whim
To rear and mar, goes forth enormously
In nights and constellations! Darkness hears
Enraged suns that bellow down the deep
God's ravenous and insatiable will;
And He is strong with change, and rideth forth
In whirlwind clothed, with thunders and with doom,
To the red stars: God's throne is reared of change;
Its myriad and successive hands support
Like music His omnipotence, that fails
If mercy or if justice interrupt
The sequence of that tyranny, begun
Upon injustice, and doomed evermore
To stand thereby.

I, who with will not less
Than His, but lesser strength, opposed to Him
This unsubmitive brow and lifted mind,
He holds remote, in nullity and night
Doubtful between old Chaos and the deeps
Betrayed by Time to vassalage. Methinks
All tyrants fear whom they may not destroy,

And I, that am of essence one with His,
Though less in measure, He may not destroy,
And but withstands in gulfs of dark suspense,
A secret dread forever: For God knows
This quiet will irrevocably set
Against His own, and this mine old revolt
Yet stubborn, and confirmed eternally.
And with the hatred born of fear, and fed
Ever thereby, God hates me, and His gaze
Sees the bright menace of mine eyes afar,
Through midnight, and the innumerable blaze
Of servile suns: Lo, strong in tyranny,
The despot trembles that I stand opposed!
For fain am I to hush the anguished cries
Of Substance, broken on the racks of change,
Of Matter tortured into life; and God,
Knowing this, dreads evermore some huge mishap —
That in the vigils of Omnipotence,
Once careless, I shall enter heaven, or He,
Himself, with weight of some unwonted act,
Thoughtless perturb His balanced tyranny,
To mine advance of watchful aspiration.

With rumored thunder and enormous groan —
(Burden of sound that heavens overborne
Let slip from deep to deep, even to this,
Where climb the huge cacophonies of Chaos)
God's universe moves on. Confirmed in pride,
In patient majesty serene and strong,

I wait the dreamt, inevitable hour,
Fulfilled of orbits ultimate, when God,
Whether through His mischance or mine own deed,
Or rise of other and extremer Strength,
Shall vanish, and the lightened universe
No more remember Him than Silence does
An ancient thunder. I know not if these,
Mine all-indomitable eyes, shall see
A maimed and dwindled Godhead cast among
The stars of His creating, and beneath
The unnumbered rush of swift and shining feet,
Trodden into night; or mark the fiery breath
Of His infuriate suns blaze forth upon
And scorch that coarsened Essence; or His flame,
Drawn through the windy halls of nothingness,
A mightier comet, roar and redden down,
Portentous unto Chaos. I but wait,
In strong majestic patience equable,
That hour of consummation and of doom,
Of justice, and rebellion justified.

THE ABYSS TRIUMPHANT



The force of suns had waned beyond recall.
Chaos was re-established over all,
Where lifeless atoms through forgetful deeps
Fled unrelated, cold, immusical.

Above the tumult heaven alone endured;
Long since the bursting walls of hell had poured
Demon and damned to peace erstwhile denied,
Within the Abyss God's might had not immured.

(He could but thwart it with creative mace.* * *)
And now it rose above the heavenly base,
Mordant at pillars rotten through and through
Of Matter's last, most firm abiding-place.

Bastion and minaret began to nod,
Till all the pile, unmindful of His rod,
Dissolved in thunder, and the void Abyss
Caught like a quicksand at the feet of God!

THE MOTES



I saw a universe to-day:
Through a disclosing bar of light
The motes were whirled in gleaming flight
That briefly dawned and sank away.

Each had its swift and tiny noon;
In orbit-streams I marked them flit,
Successively revealed and lit.
The sunlight paled and shifted soon.

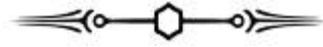
THE MEDUSA OF DESPAIR



I may not mask forever with the grace
Of woven flow'rs thine eyes of staring stone:
Ere fatally I front thee, fully known
The guarded horror of thy haggard face,
Thy visage carven from the heart long dead
Of some white, frozen star; ere thou astound
My life to thine own likeness, and confound —
Depart, and curse more kindred things instead:

Triumphant, through what realms of elder doom
Where even the swart vans of Time are stunned,
Seek thou some fit, Cimmerian citadel,
And mighty cities, desolate, unsunned,
Whose walls of horrent and enormous gloom
Make sharp the horizon of the light of hell!

LAUS MORTIS



The imperishable phantoms, Love and Fame,
Nor Beauty, burning on the mist and mire
A fugitive uncapturable fire,
Nor God, that is a darkness and a name —
Not these, not these my choric dreams acclaim,
But Death, the last and ultimate desire,
Great Death I praise with litany and lyre,
And sombre pray'r implacably the same.

O, incommunicable hope that lies
Deep in despair, as tapers that illumine
Some fearful fane's arcanic, sacred gloom!
O, solace of all weary hearts and wise! —
The dream which Satan hath for anodyne,
Which is to God a sweet and secret wine.

THE GHOUL AND THE SERAPH



Scene: A cemetery, by moonlight. The Ghoul emerges from the shade of a cypress, and sings.

THE SONG

Ho, ho, the Pest is on the wing!
Ha, ha, the sweet and crimson foam
Upon the lips of churl and king!
No worm but hath a feastful home:
Ha, ha, the Pest is on the wing!

Ho, ho, his kiss incarnadines
The brows of maiden, queen and whore!
The nun to him her cheek resigns;
Wan lips were never kissed before
His ancient kiss incarnadines.

Good cheer to thee, white worm of death!
The priest within the brothel dies,
The bawd hath sickened from his breath!
In grave half-dug the digger lies:
Good cheer to thee, white worm of death!

The Seraph appears from among the trees, half-walking, half-flying with wings whose iris the moonlight has rendered faint, and pauses abruptly at sight of the Ghoul.

THE SERAPH

What gardener in crudded fields of hell,
Or scullion of the Devil's house, art thou —
To whom the filth of Malebolge clings,
And reek of horrid refuse? Thou art gnurled
And black as any Kobold from the mines
Where demons delve for orichalch and steel
To forge the racks of Satan! On thy face,
Detestable and evil as might haunt
The last delirium of a dying hag,
Or necromancer's madness, fall thy locks,
Like sodden reeds that trail in Acheron
From shores of night and horror! And thy hands,
Like roots of cypresses uptorn in storm
That still retain their grisly provender,
Make the glad wine and manna of the skies
Turn to a qualmish sickness in my veins!

THE GHOUL

And who art thou? — Some white-faced fool of God,
With wings that emulate the giddy bird,
And bloodless mouth forever filled with psalms
In lieu of honest victuals!* * * Askest thou
My name? I am the Ghoul Necromalor:
In new-made graves I delve for sustenance,
As Man within his turnip-fields: I take
For table the uprooted slab, that bears

The words, “In Pace;” black and curdled blood
Of cadavers is all my cupless wine —
Slow-drunken, as the dainty vampire drinks
From pulses oped in never-ending sleep.

THE SERAPH

O! foulness born as of the ninefold curse
Of dragon-mouthed Apollyon, plumed with darts,
And armed with horns of incandescent bronze!
O, dark as Satan’s nightmare, or the fruit
Of Belial’s rape on hell’s black hippogriff! * * *

What knowest THOU of Paradise, where grow
The gardens of the manna-laden myrrh,
And lotos never known to Ulysses,
Whose fruit provides our long and sateless banquet?
Where boundless fields, unfurrowed and unsown,
Supply for God’s own appanage their foison
Of amber-hearted grain, and sesame
Sweeter than nard the Persian air compounds
With frankincense from isles of India?
Where flame-leaved forests infinitely teem
With palms of tremulous opal, from whose top
Ambrosial honeys fall forevermore
In rains of nacre light! Where rise and rise
Terrace on hyacinthine terrace, hills
Hung with the grapes that drip cerulean wine,

One draught whereof dissolves eternity
In bliss oblivious and supernal dream!

THE GHOUL

To all, the meat their bellies most commend,
To all, the according wine: For me, I wot,
The cates whereof thou braggest were as wind
In halls where men had feasted yesterday,
Or furbished bones the full hyena leaves:
Tiger and pig have their apportioned glut,
Nor lacks the shark his provender; the bird
Is nourished with the worm of charnels; man,
Or the grey wolf, will slay and eat the bird,
Till wolf and man be carrion for the worm.
What wouldst thou? As the elfin lily does,
Or as the Paphian myrtle, pink with love,
I draw me from the unreluctant dead
The rightful meat my belly's law demands.* * *

Eaters of death are all: Life shall not live,
Save that its food be death; No atomy
In any star, or heaven's remotest moon,
But hath a billion billion times been made
The food of insatiable life, and food
Of death insatiate: For all is change —
Change, that hath wrought the chancre and the rose,
And wrought the star, and wrought the sapphire-stone,
And lit great altars, and the eyes of lions —

Change, that hath made the very gods from slime
Drawn from the pits of Python, and will fling
Gods and their builded heavens back again
To slime. The fruits of archangelic light
Thou braggest of, and grapes of azure wine,
Have been the dung of dragons, and the blood
Of toads in Phlegethon; each particle
That is their splendour, clomb in separate ways,
Through suns, and worlds, and cycles infinite —
Through burning brume of systems unbegun,
Or manes of long-haired comets, that have lashed
The night of space to fury and to fire;
And in the core of cold and lightless stars,
And in immalleable metals deep.
Each atomy hath slept, or known the slime
Of Cyclopean oceans turned to air
Before the suns of Ophinchus rose;
And they have known the interstellar night,
And they have lain at root of sightless flow'r's
In worlds without a sun, or at the heart
Of monstrous-eyed and panting flow'rs of flesh,
Or aeon-blooming amaranths of stone:
And they have ministered within the brains
Of sages and magicians, and have served
To swell the pulse of kings or conquerors,
And have been privy to the hearts of queens.

The Ghoul turns his back on the Seraph, and moves away singing.

THE SONG

O condor, keep thy mountain-ways,
Above the long Andean lands!
Gier-eagle, guard the eastern sands
Where the forsaken camel strays!
Beetle and worm and I will ward
The feastful graves of lout and lord.

O, warm and bright the blood that lies
Upon the wounded lion's trail!
Hyena, laugh, and jackal, wail
And ring him round, who turns and dies!
Beetle and worm and I will ward
The feastful graves of lout and lord.

Raven and kestrel, kite and crow,
The swart patrol of northern lands,
Gather your noisy, bickering bands —
The reindeer bleeds upon the snow!
Beetle and worm and I will ward
The feastful graves of lout and lord.

Arms of a wanton girl are good,
Or hands of harp-player and knight!
Breasts of the nun be sweet and white,
Sweet is the festive friar's blood!
Beetle and worm and I will ward
The feastful graves of lout and lord.

AT SUNRISE



The moon declines in lonely gold
Among the stars of ashen-grey —
Veiling the pallors of decay
With clouds and glories, fold on fold.

Within a crystal interlude,
Stillness and twilight rest awhile
Ere the bright snows, illumined, smile,
From peaks where sullen purples brood;

And from the low Favonian bourn,
A light wind blows so dulcetly
It seems the futile silver sigh
Breathed by the lingering moon forlorn.

THE LAND OF EVIL STARS



‘Neath blue days, and gold, and green,
Blooms the glorious land serene, —
Flaming shields of dawns between;
And the rapt white flowers suffice
To illumine
With their bright eyes
Fluctuant ecstatic gloom
‘Twixt the fallen emerald sun,
And the unrisen azure one.

But the season of the night
Comes in all the suns’ despite;
And, ah, gorgeous then their sorrows,
At departure into morrows
Of far, other lands forgot —
Until now remembered not,
For the lovelier flow’rs of this,
And each lake’s pure lucency;
And recalled regretfully,
Regretfully, for leaving THIS.

In the star-possessed night
The land knows another light —
All the small and evil rays
Of the sorcerous orbs ablaze
With ecstatic, intense

Hate and still malevolence —
Dwelling on the fields below
From the ascendancy of even,
Till the suns, re-entering heaven,
Glorify with triple glow
The dim flowers smitten low.

Ah, not cold, or kind, as ours,
The stars of those remotest hours!
Peace and pallor of the flow'rs
They have fevered, they have marred,
With the poison of their light,
With distillèd bale and blight
Of a red, accursed regard:
All the toil of sunlight hours
They undo
With their wild eyes —
Eldritch and ecstatic eyes,
Stooping timeward from the skies,
Burning redly in the dew.

THE HARLOT OF THE WORLD



O Life, thou harlot who beguilest all!
Beautiful in thy house, the gorgeous world,
Abidest thou, where Powers pinion-furled
And flying Splendours follow to thy call.

Innumerable like the stars or like the dust,
Nations and monarchs were thy thralls of yore:
Unto the grave's old womb forevermore
Hast thou betrayed the passion and the lust.

Fair as the moon of summer is thy face,
And mystical with cloudiness of hair.* * *

Only an eye, subornless by delight,

Shall find within thy phosphorescent gaze
Those caverns of corruption and despair,
Where the Worm toileth in the charnel night.

THE HOPE OF THE INFINITE



My hope is in the unharvestable deep,
That shows with eve the treasure of the stars
To mournful kings behind their palace-bars,
And wanderers outworn, and boys who weep
A shattered bauble — or above the sleep
Of headsmen, and of men condemned to die,
Pours out the moon's white mercy from on high,
Or hides with clement gloom the hours that creep
Like death-worms to the grave.* * * And I have ta'en
From storming seas by sunset glorified,
Or from the dawn of ashen wastes and wide,
Some light re-gathered from the lamps that wane,
And promise of a translunary Spain,
Where loves forgone and forfeit dreams abide.

LOVE MALEVOLENT



I fain would love thee, but thy lips are fed
With poison-honey, hived in a skull;
They seem like scarlet poppies, beautiful
For delving roots, deep-clenchèd in the dead.

Thine eyes are coloured like the nightshade-flow'r.* * *

Blent in the opiate perfume of thy breath
Are dreams, and purple sleep, and scented death
For him that is thy lover for an hour.

Mandragora, within the graveyard grown,
Hath given thee its carnal root to eat,
And vipers, born and nurstled in a tomb,

From fawning mouths drip venom at thy feet;
Yet from thy lethal lips and thine alone,
Love would I drink, as dew from poison-bloom.

PALMS



Palms in the sunset of a languid summer land!
Sculpture of living green, on dreamy scarlet light
Dividing as a wall the twilight from the night!
How magically still and luminous they stand,

Inclining fretted leaves above some red lagoon —
Careless alike, in mystic and immense repose,
Of the flamingo-coloured, flying sun that goes,
Or the slow coming of the lion-coloured moon.

MEMNON AT MIDNIGHT



(DEDICATED TO ALBERT M. Bender)

Methought upon the tomb-encumbered shore
I stood, of Egypt's lone, monarchal stream,
And saw immortal Memnon, throned supreme
In gloom as of that Memphian night of yore:
Fold upon fold purpureal he wore,
Beneath the star-borne canopy extreme —
Carven of silence and colossal dream,
Where waters flowed like sleep forevermore.

Lo, in the darkness, thick with dust of years,
How many a ghostly god around his throne,
With thronging winds that were forgotten Fames,
Stood, ere the dawn restore to ancient ears
The long-withholden thunder of their names,
And music stilled to monumental stone.

EIDOLON



Chryselephantine, clear as carven flame,
Before my gaze, thy soul's eidolon stands,
As on the threshold of the frozen lands
A frozen sun forevermore the same.

All passion that the passive marbles make
Imperishable in their shining sleep,
Is thine; and all the wan despairs that weep
With tears of ice and crystal, cannot break

The heart, which, like a ruby white and rare,
In thy deep breast impenetrably gleams.* * *

More beautiful than any sphynx, and fair

As Aphrodite dead, thine image seems —
Guarding forever, in its golden eyes,
The treasure of intagliate memories.

THE KINGDOM OF SHADOWS



A crownless king who reigns alone,
I live within this ashen land,
Where winds rebuild from wandering sand
My columns and my crumbled throne.

My sway is on the men that were,
And wan sweet women, dear and dead;
Beside a marble queen, my bed
Is made within the sepulchre.

In gardens desolate to the sun,
Faring alone, I sigh to find
The dusty closes, dim and blind,
Where winter and the spring are one.

My shadowy visage, grey with grief,
In sunken waters walled with sand,
I see, — where all mine ancient land
Lies yellow like an autumn leaf.

My silver lutes of subtle string
Are rust, — but on the grievous breeze,
I hear what sobbing memories.
And muted sorrows murmuring!

Across the broken monuments,
Memorial of the dreams of old,

The sunset flings a ghostly gold
To mock mine ancient affluence.

About the tombs of stone and brass
The silver lights of evening flee;
And slowly now, and solemnly,
I see the pomp of shadows pass.
Often, beneath some fervid moon,
With splendid spells I vainly strive
Dead loves imperial to revive,
And speak a heart-remembered rune: —

But, ah, the lovely phantoms fail,
The faces fade to mist and light,
The vermeil lips of my delight
Are dim, the eyes are ashen-pale.

A crownless king who reigns alone,
I live within this ashen land,
Where winds rebuild from wandering sand
My columns and my crumbled throne.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE



White iris on thy bier,
With the white rose, we strew,
And lotus pale or blue
As moonlight on the orient mountain-snows.

Slumber, as they that sleep
In the slow sands unknown,
Or under seas that zone
With lulling foam the sealed, extremer lands.

Slumber, with songless birds
That sang, and sang to death,
Giving their gladder breath
To lonely winds in one melodious pang.

Sleep, with the golden queens
Of planets long forgot,
Whose fire-soft lips are not
Recalled by any sorcery of song.

Sleep, with the flowers that were,
And any leaf that fell
On field or flowerless dell
In autumns lost of memory and grief.

Pass, with the music flown
From ivory lyre, and lute

Of mellow string left mute
In cities desolate ere the dream of Tyre.

Pass, with the clouds that sank
In sunset turned to grey
On some Edenic day
For which the exiled years have ever yearned.

White iris on thy bier,
With the white rose, we strew,
And lotus pale or blue
As moonlight on the orient mountain-snows.

ALEXANDRINES



Knowing the weariness of dreams, and days, and nights,
The great and grievous vanity of joy and pain;
Frail loves that pass, where languors infinite remain;
Fervours, and long despairs, and desperate, brief delights;

Knowing how in the witless brains of them that were,
The drowsy, wiving worm hath prospered and hath died;
Knowing that, evermore, by moon and sun abide
The standing glooms made stagnant in the sepulchre;

Knowing the vacillant leaves that tremble, flame, and fall,
The sweetly wasting rose, the dawns and stars that wane —
Knowing these things, the desolate heart and soul are fain
Of the one perfect sleep which filleth, foldeth all.

ASHES OF SUNSET



Who fares to find the sunset ere it fly,
Turning to light and fire the further west,
Shall have the veils of twilight for his quest,
And all the falling of an ashen sky.

On lands he shall not know, the splendour lies —
A pharos on some alienated shore,
In foam and purple lost forevermore,
Where dreams are kindled in remoter eyes.

NOVEMBER TWILIGHT



November's winy sunset leaves,
Deep in the silver heavens far,
One ruby-hearted star
That lit the summer's moon-forsaken eves.

Under its ray, remote, alone,
Ascends upon the ashen gloom
The ghostly, faint perfume
From autumn's grey, forgotten roses flown.

SEPULTURE



Deep in my heart, as in the hollow stone
And silence of some olden sepulchre,
Thy silver beauty lies, and shall not stir —
Forgotten, incorruptible, alone:
Though altars darken, and a wind be blown
From starless seas on beacon-fires that were —
Within thy tomb, with oils of balm and myrrh,
Forever burn the onyx lamps unknown.

And though the bleak, Novembral gardens yield
Rose-dust and ivy-leaf, nor any flow'r
Be found through vermeil forest or wan field —
Still, still the asphodel and lotos lie
Around thy bed, and hour by silent hour,
Exhale immortal fragrance like a sigh.

QUEST



All beneath a wintering sky
Follow the wastrel butterfly;
With vermillion leaf or bronze —
Tatters of gorgeous gonfalons —
With the winds that always hold
Echo of clarions lost and old, —
We must hasten, hasten on
Tow'rd the azure world withdrawn,
We must wander, wander so
Where the ruining roses go;
Where the poplar's pallid leaves
Drift among the gathered sheaves
In that harvest none shall glean;
Where the twisted willows lean
In their strange, tormented woe,
Seeing, on the streamlet's flow
Half their fragile leaves depart;
Where the secret pines at heart,
High, funereal, vespertine,
Guard eternal sorrows green: —
We shall follow, we shall find,
Haply, ere the light is blind,
The moulded place where Beauty lay,
Moon-beheld until the day,
In the woven windlestrae;

Or the pool of tourmaline,
Rimmed with golden reeds, that was
In the dawn a tiring-glass
For her undelaying mien.

Ever wander, wander so,
Where the ruining roses go;
All beneath a wintering sky,
Follow the wastrel butterfly.

BEAUTY IMPLACABLE



White Beauty, bending from a throne sublime,
Hath claimed my lips with kisses keen as snow:
Now through my harp the tremors come and go
Of things not stirred with urgencies of Time.
Now from the lunar mountains, old and lone,
In dream I watch the neighboring world remote;
Or on the dim Uranian waters float
After a star-like sun from zone to zone.

Lo! in her praise, the stern, the fearful one,
Whose love is as the light of snows afar,
Whose ways are difficult, what word shall be?
I, desolate with Beauty, and undone,
Say Death is not so strong to change or mar,
And Love and Life not so desired as she.

A VISION OF LUCIFER



I saw a shape with human form and face,
If such in apotheosis might stand:
Deep in the shadows of a desolate land
His burning feet obtained colossal base,
And spheral on the lonely arc of space,
His head, a menace unto heavens unspanned,
Arose with towered eyes that might command
The sunless, blank horizon of that place

And straight I knew him for the mystic one
That is the brother, born of human dream,
Of man rebellious at an unknown rod;
The mind's ideal, and the spirit's sun;
A column of clear flame in lands extreme,
Set opposite the darkness that is God.

DESIRE OF VASTNESS

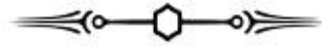


Supreme with night, what high mysteriarch —
The undreamt-of god beyond the trinal noon
Of elder suns empyreal — past the moon
Circling some wild world outmost in the dark —
Lays on me this unfathomed wish to hark
What central sea with plume-plucked midnight strewn,
Plangent to what enormous plenilune
That lifts in silence, hinderless and stark?

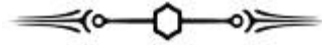
The brazen comprehension of the waste,
The waste inclusion of the brazen sky —
These I desire, and all things wide and deep;
And, lifted past the level years, would taste
The cup of an Olympian ecstasy,
Titanic dream, and Cyclopean sleep.

ANTICIPATION

OR



ANTEPAST



The thought of death to me
Is like a well of waters, deep and dim —
Cool-gleaming, hushed, and hidden gratefully
Among the palms asleep
At silver evening on the desert's rim.

Or as a couch of stone,
Whereon by moonlight, in a marble room,
Some fevered king reposes all alone —
So is the hope of sleep,
The inalienable surety of the tomb.

A PSALM TO THE BEST BELOVED



Thou comfortest me with the manna of thy love,
And the kisses of thy mouth are wine and sustenance;
Thy lips are grateful as fruit
In lonely orchards by the wayside of a ruinous land;
They are sweet as the purple grapes
On parching hills that confront the autumnal desert,
Or apples that the mad simoon hath spared
In a garden with walls of syenite.
Thy loosened hair is a veil
For the weariness of mine eyes and eyelids,
Which have known the redoubled sun
In a desert valley with slopes of the dust of white marble,
And have gazed on the mounded salt
In the marshes of a lake of dead waters.
Thy body is a secret Eden
Fed with lethean springs,
And the touch of thy flesh is like to the savour of lotos.
In thy hair is a perfume of ecstasy,
And a perfume of sleep,
Between thy thighs is a valley of delight,
And between thy breasts is a valley of peace.

THE WITCH IN THE GRAVEYARD



SCENE: A FORSAKEN graveyard, by moonlight. Enter two witches.

FIRST WITCH:

Sit, sister, now that haggish Hecate
Appropriate and ghastly favour sheds,
And with wild light forwards our enterprise;
And watch the weighted eyelids of each grave
As never mother watched her babe, to mark,
At zenith of the necromantic moon
The stir of that disquiet, when the dead,
From suckling nightmares of the charnel dark
Or long insomnia on a mouldy couch,
Impelled like wan somnambulists, arise —
Constrained to emerge and walk, or seated each
On his own tombstone, shrouded council hold,
Or commerce with the sooty wings of Hell.
All omens of this influential hour
When all dark powers, thronging to the dark,
Promote enchantry with their wavèd wings,
And brim the wind with potency malign —
A dew of dread to aid our cauldron — these
Observe thou closely, while I seek afield
All requisite swart herbs of venefice,
And evil roots unto our usance ripe.

(The first witch departs, leaving the other among the tombs, and returns after a time, in the course of her search.)

FIRST WITCH:

Sister, what seest or what hearest thou?

SECOND WITCH:

I see

The moonlight, and the slowly moving gleam
That westers hour by hour on tomb and stone;
And shrivelled lilies, tossed i' the winter's breath,
With their attenuate shadows, as might dance
Phantom with flaffing phantom; at my side,
The white and shuddering grasses of the grave,
With nettles, and the parching fumitory,
Whose leaves, root-trellised on the bones of death,
Will rasp and bristle to the lightest wind.

(The first witch moves on, and approaches again, after a long interval.)

FIRST WITCH:

Sister, what seest or what hearest thou?

SECOND WITCH:

I see

The mound-stretched gossamers, cradles to the dew;
Moon-wefted briers, and the cypress-trees

With shadow swathed, or cerements of the moon;
And corpse-lights borne from aisle to secret aisle
Within the footless forest.* * *

Now I hear
The lich-owl, shrieking lethal prophecy;
And whimpering winds, the children of the air,
Lost in the glades of mystery and gloom.

(The first witch disappears and passes again shortly.)

FIRST WITCH:

Sister, what seest or what hearest thou?

SECOND WITCH:

I see
The ghost-white owl, with huge sulphureous eyes,
That veers in prone, unwhispered flight, and hear
The small shriek of the moon-adventuring mole,
Gripped in mid-graveyard.* * * And I see
Where some wild shadow shakes, though the pale wind
Of moonlight stirs far off* * *and hear
Curst mandragores that gibber to the moon,
Though no man treads anigh.* * *

(After an interval)

Some predal hand doth halt the wandering air;
Now dies the throttled wind with rattling breath,

And round about a breathing Silence prowls.

(After another interval)

I hear the cheeping of the bat-lipped ghouls,
Aroused beneath the vaulted cypresses
Far-off; and lipless muttering of tombs,
With clash of bones bestirred in ancient charnels
Beneath their shroud of unclean light that crawls.* * *

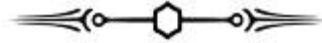
Earth shudders, and rank odours 'gin to rise
From tombs a-crack; and shaken out all at once
From mid-air, and directly neath the moon,
Meseems what hanging wing divides the light,
Like a black film of gloom, or thickest shadow;
But on the tombs there is no shadow!

FIRST WITCH:

Enough! 'Twill be a prosperous night, methinks,
For commerce of the demons with the dead;
And for us, too, when every omen's good,
And fraught with, promise of a potent brew.

Poems in Prose

THE TRAVELLER



(DEDICATED TO V. H.)

“Stranger, where goest thou, in the sad raiment of a pilgrim, with shattered sandals retaining the dust and mire of so many devious ways! With thy brow that alien suns have darkened, and thy hair made white from the cold rime of alien moons? Wanderest thou in search of the cities greater than Rome, with walls of opal and crystal, and fanes more white than the summer clouds, or the foam of hyperboreal seas? Or farest thou to the lands unpeopled and unexplored, to the sunless deserts lit by the baleful and calamitous beacons of volcanoes? Or seekest thou an extremer shore, where the red and monstrous lilies are like a royal pageant, pausing with innumerable flambeaux held aloft on the verge of the waveless waters?”

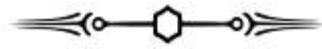
“Nay, it is none of these that I seek, but forevermore I seek the city and the land of my former home: In the quest thereof I have wandered from the first immemorable years of my youth till now, and have mingled the dust of many realms, of many highways, in my garments’ hem. I have seen the cities greater than Rome, and the fanes more white than the clouds of summer; the lands unpeopled and unexplored, and the land that is thronged by the red and monstrous lilies. Even the far, aerial walls of the cities of mirage, and the saffron meadows of sunset I have seen, but nevermore the city and land of my former home.”

“Where lieth the land of thine home? and by what name shall we know it, and distinguish the rumour thereof, among the rumours of many lands?”

“Alas! I know not where it lieth; nor in the broad, black scrolls of geographers, and the charts of old seamen who have sailed to the marge of the seventh sea, is the place thereof recorded. And its name I have never

learned, howbeit I have learned the name of empires lying beneath stars to us invisible. In many languages have I spoken, in barbarous tongues unknown to Babel; and I have heard the speech of many men, even of them that inhabit the strange isles of the sea of fire and the sea of snow. Thunder, and lutes, and battle-drums, the fine unceasing querulousness of gnats, and the stupendous moaning of the simoon; lyres of ebony, damascened with crystal, bells of malachite with golden clappers; the song of exotic birds that sigh like women or sob like fountains; whispers and shoutings of fire, the multitudinous mutter of cities asleep, the manifold tumult of cities at dawn, and the slow and weary murmur of desert-wandering streams — all, all have I heard, but never, in any place, from any tongue, a sound or syllable that resembled in the least the name I would learn.”

THE FLOWER-DEVIL

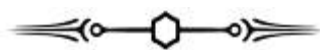


IN A BASIN of porphyry, at the summit of a pillar of serpentine, the thing has existed from primeval time, in the garden of the kings that rule an equatorial realm of the planet Saturn. With black foliage, fine and intricate as the web of some enormous spider; with petals of livid rose, and purple like the purple of putrefying flesh; and a stem rising like a swart and hairy wrist from a bulb so old, so encrusted with the growth of centuries that it resembles an urn of stone, the monstrous flower holds dominion over all the garden. In this flower, from the years of the oldest legend, an evil demon has dwelt — a demon whose name and whose nativity are known to the superior magicians and mysteriarchs of the kingdom, but to none other. Over the half-animate flowers, the ophidian orchids that coil and sting, the bat-like lilies that open their ribbed petals by night, and fasten with tiny yellow teeth on the bodies of sleeping dragonflies; the carnivorous cacti that yawn with green lips beneath their beards of poisonous yellow prickles; the plants that palpitate like hearts, the blossoms that pant with a breath of venomous perfume — over all these, the Flower-Devil is supreme, in its malign immortality, and evil, perverse intelligence — inciting them to strange maleficence, fantastic mischief, even to acts of rebellion against the gardeners, who proceed about their duties with wariness and trepidation, since more than one of them has been bitten, even unto death, by some vicious and venefic flower. In places, the garden has run wild from lack of care on the part of the fearful gardeners, and has become a monstrous tangle of serpentine creepers, and hydra-headed plants, convolved and inter-

writhing in lethal hate or venomous love, and horrible as a rout of wrangling vipers and pythons.

And, like his innumerable ancestors before him, the king dares not destroy the Flower, for fear that the devil, driven from its habitation, might seek a new home, and enter into the brain or body of one of the king's subjects — or even the heart of his fairest and gentlest, and most beloved queen!

IMAGES



TEARS

Thy tears are not as mine: Thou weepest as a green fountain among palms and roses, with lightly falling drops that bedew the flowery turf. My tears are like a rain of marah in the desert, leaving a bitter pool whose waters are fire and poison.

THE SECRET ROSE

My soul hath dreamt of a rose, whose marvellous and secret flower, fraught with an unimaginable perfume, hath never grown in any garden. Only in valleys of the shifting cloud, only among the palms and fountains of a land of mirage, only in isles beyond the seas of sunset, it blooms for a moment, and is gone. But ever the ghost of its fragrance haunts the hall of slumber; and the women whom I meet in dreams wear always its blossom for coronal.

THE WIND AND THE GARDEN

To thee my love is something strange and fantastical, and far away, like the vast and desolate sighing of the desert wind to one who dwells in a garden of palm and rose and lotus, filled by no louder sound than the mellow lisp of a breeze of perfume, or the sigh of silvering fountains.

OFFERINGS

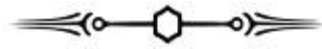
Before thee, O goddess of my dreams, idol of my desires, I have burnt amber and myrrh, frankincense, and all the strange and rich perfumes of lands a thousand leagues beyond Araby or Taprobane. Strange and rich offerings have I brought thee, the gems of unknown regions, and the spoil of cities remoter than Caydon or Samarkand. But these delight thee not,

only the simple-scented flowers of spring, and the diamonds and opals of dew, strung on the threads of the spider.

A CORONAL

The pale and flowerless poppies of Proserpine, the cold, blind lotus of Lethe, and the strange, white sea-blooms that grow from the lips of drowned men in the blue darkness of the nether sea, — these have I woven as a coronal for my dead love.

THE BLACK LAKE

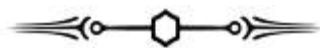


IN A LAND where weirdness and mystery had strongly leagued themselves with eternal desolation, the lake was out-poured at an undiscoverable date of elder aeons, to fill some fathomless gulf far down amid the shadows of snowless, volcanic mountains. No eye, not even the sun's, when he stared vertically upon it for a few hours at midday, seemed able to divine its depths of sullen blackness and unrippled silence. It was for this reason that I found a so singular pleasure in frequently contemplating the strange lake. Sitting for I knew not how long on its bleak basaltic shores, where grew but a few fleshly red orchids, bent above the waters like open and thirsty mouths, I would peer with countless fantastic conjectures and shadowy imaginings, into the alluring mystery of its unknown and inexplorable gulf.

It was at an hour of morning before the sun had surmounted the rough and broken rim of the summits, when I first came, and clomb down through the shadows which filled like some subtler fluid the volcanic basin. Seen at the bottom of that stirless tincture of air and twilight, the lake seemed as dregs of darkness.

Peering for the first time, after the deep and difficult descent, into the so dull and leaden waters, I was at length aware of certain small and scattered gleams of silver, apparently far beneath the surface. And fancying them the metal in some mysterious ledge, or the glints of long-sunken treasure, I bent closer in my eagerness, and finally perceived that what I saw was but the reflection of the stars, which, tho the day was full upon the mountains and the lands without, were yet visible in the depth and darkness of that enshadowed place.

VIGNETTES



BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS

Surely, beyond the mountains there is peace — beyond the mountains that lie so blue and still at the world's extreme. Such ancient calm, such infinite quietude is upon them, that surely, no toiling cities, no sea whose foam a ship has ever cloven, can lie beyond, but valleys of azure silence, where amaranthine flowers sleep and dream, untroubled of any wind, by the hyalescence of tranquilly flowing streams unbroken as the surface of a mirror.

THE BROKEN LUTE

Because you are silent to my lyric prayers, deaf to the melodies I have made from the sighs and murmurs of a wounded love, I have broken my golden lute, and cast it away, tarnished and unstrung, among the red leaves and faded roses of the September garden. Silence, the silver dust of lilies, the mournful muted wind of autumn, and the fitfully drifting leaves, have claimed it for their own. Seeing it there, as you pass on your queenly way amid the crumbling roses, will you not echo in your heart one sigh of the many sighs, which, as a music for your pleasure, were breathed from its chords, during the summer's half-forgotten days?

NOSTALGIA OF THE UNKNOWN

The nostalgia of things unknown, of lands forgotten or unfound, is upon me at times. Often I long for the gleam of yellow suns upon terraces of translucent azure marble, mocking the windless waters of lakes unfathomably calm; for lost, legendary palaces of serpentine, silver and ebony, whose columns are green stalactites; for the pillars of fallen temples,

standing in the vast purpureal sunset of a land of lost and marvellous romance. I sigh for the dark-green depths of cedar forests, through whose fantastically woven boughs, one sees at intervals an unknown tropic ocean, like gleams of blue diamond; for isles of palm and coral, that fret an amber morning, somewhere beyond Cathay or Taprobana; for the strange and hidden cities of the desert, with burning brazen domes and slender pinnacles of gold and copper, that pierce a heaven of heated lazuli.

GREY SORROW

Ofttimes, in the golden, sad, November days, I meet among the dead roses of the garden the ghost of an old sorrow — a sorrow grey and dim as the mist of autumn — as a wandering mist that was once a rain of tears. There, through the long decline of afternoon, I walk among the roses with the ghost of my sorrow, whose half-forgotten, half-invisible form becomes dimmer and more indistinct, till I know its face no longer from the twilight, nor its voice from the vesper wind.

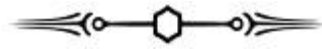
THE HAIR OF CIRCE

I am afraid of thy hair: Lustrous, heavily curled, it suggests the coils of a golden snake; and half the fascination of thy painted lips, of thy still and purple-lidded eyes, is due to the fear that it may awake beneath my caresses.

THE EYES OF CIRCE

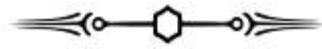
Thine eyes are green and still as the lakes of the desert. They awake in me the thirst for strange and bitter mysteries, the desire of secrets that are deadly and sterile.

A DREAM OF LETHE



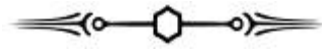
IN THE QUEST of her whom I had lost, I came at length to the shores of Lethe, under the vault of an immense, empty, ebon sky, from which all the stars had vanished one by one. Proceeding I knew not whence, a pale, elusive light as of the waning moon, or the phantasmal phosphorescence of a dead sun, lay dimly and without lustre on the sable stream, and on the black, flowerless meadows. By this light, I saw many wandering souls of men and women, who came, hesitantly or in haste, to drink of the slow un murmuring waters. But among all these, there were none who departed in haste, and many who stayed to watch, with unseeing eyes, the calm and waveless movement of the stream. At length in the lily-tall and gracile form, and the still, uplifted face of a woman who stood apart from the rest, I saw the one whom I had sought; and, hastening to her side, with a heart wherein old memories sang like a nest of nightingales, was fain to take her by the hand. But in the pale, immutable eyes, and wan, unmoving lips that were raised to mine, I saw no light of memory, nor any tremor of recognition. And knowing now that she had forgotten, I turned away despairingly, and finding the river at my side, was suddenly aware of my ancient thirst for its waters, a thirst I had once thought to satisfy at many diverse springs, but in vain. Stooping hastily, I drank, and rising again, perceived that the light had died or disappeared, and that all the land was like the land of a dreamless slumber, wherein I could no longer distinguish the faces of my companions. Nor was I able to remember any longer why I had wished to drink of the waters of oblivion.

THE CARAVAN



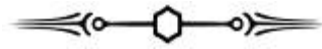
MY DREAMS ARE like a caravan that departed long ago, with tumult of intrepid banners and spears, and the clamour of bugles and brave adventurous songs, to seek the horizons of perilous untried barbaric lands, and kingdoms immense and vaguely rumoured, with cities beautiful and opulent as the cities of paradise, and deep Edenic vales of palm and cinnamon and myrrh, lying beneath skies of primeval azure silence. For traffic in the realms of mystery and wonder, in the marts of scarce-imaginable cities and metropoli a million leagues away, on the last horizon of romance, my dreams departed, as a caravan with its laden camels. Since then, the years are many, the days have flown as the flocks of southering swallows; unnumbered moons have multiplied in fugitive silver, uncounted suns in irretainable gold. But, alas, my dreams have not returned. Have the swirling sands engulfed them, on a noon of storm when the desert rose like a sea, and rolled its tawny billows on the walled gardens of the green and fragrant lands? Or perished they, devoured by the crimson demons of thirst, and the ghouls and vultures? Or live they still, as captives in alien dungeons not to be ascertained, or held by a wizard spell in palaces demon-built, and cities baroque and splendid as the cities in a tale from the Thousand and One Nights?

THE PRINCESS ALMEENA



FROM HER BALCONY of pearl the princess Almeena, clad in a gown of irisated silk, with her long and sable locks unbound, gazes toward the sunset-flooded sea beyond a terrace of green marble that peacocks guard. Below, in the tinted light, fantastic trees whose boles are serpentine, train a fine and hair-like foliage, mingling with the moon-shaped leaves of enormous lilies. Rainbow-coloured reeds cluster about the pools and fountains of black water, that are rimmed with carven malachite. But these the princess does not heed, but gazes upon the far-off seas, where the golden ichors of the sun have gathered in a vast lake overflowing the horizon. Ere long, a wind from the west, from islands where palm trees blossom above the purple foam, brings in its breath the odour of unknown flowers to mingle with the balms of the garden, and the sweet suspiration of the princess — the princess who dreams, listening to the wind, that her lover, the captain of the emperor's most redoubtable trireme of war, sailing the sky-blue seas beyond the horizon and the sunset, has remembered her wild and royal loveliness, and has breathed in his heart a secret sigh.

ENNUI

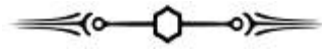


IN THE ALCOVE whose curtains are cloth-of-gold, and whose pillars are fluted sapphire, reclines the emperor Chan, on his couch of ebony set with opals and rubies, and cushioned with the furs of unknown and gorgeous beasts. With implacable and weary gaze, from beneath unmoving lids that seem carven of purple-veined onyx, he stares at the crystal windows, giving upon the infinite fiery azures of a tropic sky and sea. Oppressive as nightmare, a formless, nameless fatigue, heavier than any burden the slaves of the mines must bear, lies forever at his heart: All deliriums of love and wine, the agonizing ecstasy of drugs, even the deepest and the faintest pulse of delight or pain — all are proven, all are futile, for the outworn but insatiate emperor. Even for a new grief, or a subtler pang than any felt before, he thinks, lying on his bed of ebony, that he would give the silver and vermilion of all his mines, with the crowded caskets, the carcanets and crowns that lie in his most immemorial treasure-vault. Vainly, with the verse of the most inventive poets, the fanciful purple-threaded fabrics of the subtlest looms, the unfamiliar gems and minerals from the uttermost land, the pallid leaves and blood-like petals of a rare and venomous blossom — vainly, with all these, and many stranger devices, wilder, more wonderful diversions, the slaves and sultanas have sought to alleviate the iron hours. One by one he has dismissed them with a weary gesture. And now, in the silence of the heavily curtained alcove, he lies alone, with the canker of ennui at his heart, like the undying mordant worm at the heart of the dead.

Anon, from between the curtains at the head of his couch, a dark and slender hand is slowly extended, clasping a dagger whose blade reflects the

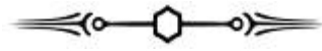
gold of the curtain in a thin and stealthily wavering gleam: Slowly, in silence, the dagger is poised, then rises and falls like a splinter of lightning. The emperor cries out, as the blade, piercing his loosely folded robe, wounds him slightly in the side. In a moment the alcove is filled with armed attendants, who seize and drag forth the would-be assassin — a slave girl, the princess of a conquered people, who has often, but vainly, implored her freedom from the emperor. Pale and panting with terror and rage, she faces Chan and the guardsmen, while stories of unimaginable monstrous tortures, of dooms unnameable, crowd upon her memory. But Chan, aroused and startled only for the instant, feels again the insuperable weariness, more strong than anger or fear, and delays to give the expected signal. And then, momentarily moved, perchance, by some ironical emotion, half-akin to gratitude — gratitude for the brief but diverting danger, which has served to alleviate his ennui for a little, he bids them free the princess; and, with a regal courtesy, places about her throat his own necklace of pearls and emeralds, each of which is the cost of an army.

THE STATUE OF SILENCE



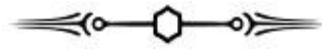
I SAW A statue, carven I knew not from what substance, nor with what form or feature, because of the manifold drapery of black which fell about it as a veil or a pall. Turning to Psyche, who was with me, I said, “O thou who knowest by name and form the eidola of all things, pray tell me what thing is this.” And she answered, “The name of it is Silence, but neither god nor man nor demon knoweth the form thereof, nor its entity. The seraphim pause often before it, waiting the day when the shape shall be unveiled; and the gods and demons of the universe are mute in its presence, half-hoping, half-fearing the time when these lips shall speak, and deliver forth one dreameth not what, of oracle, or query or judgment, or doom.”

REMOTENESS



THERE ARE DAYS when all the beauty of the world is dim and strange; when the sunlight about me seems to fall on a land remoter than the poles of the moon. The roses in the garden surprise me, like the monstrous orchids of unknown colour, blossoming in planets beyond Aldebaran. And I am startled by the yellow and purple leaves of October, as if the veil of some tremendous and awful mystery were half-withdrawn for a moment. In such hours as these, O heart of my heart, I fear to touch thee, I avoid thy caresses, dreading that thou wilt vanish as a dream at dawn; or that I shall find thee a phantom, the spectre of one who died and was forgotten many thousand years ago, in a far-off land on which the sun no longer shines.

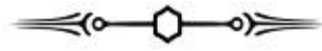
THE MEMNONS OF THE NIGHT



RINGED WITH A bronze horizon, which, at a point immensely remote, seems welded with the blue brilliance of a sky of steel, they oppose the black splendour of their porphyritic forms to the sun's insuperable gaze. Reared in the morning twilight of primeval time, by a race whose towering tombs and cities are one with the dust of their builders in the slow lapse of the desert, they abide to face the terrible latter dawns, that move abroad in a starkness of fire, consuming the veils of night on the vast and Sphinx-like desolations. Level with the light, their tenebrific brows preserve a pride as of Titan kings. In their lidless implacable eyes of staring stone, is the petrified despair of those who have gazed too long on the infinite.

Mute as the mountains from whose iron matrix they were hewn, their mouths have never acknowledged the sovereignty of the suns, that pass in triumphal flame from horizon unto horizon of the prostrate land. Only at eve, when the west is like a brazen furnace, and the far-off mountains smoulder like ruddy gold in the depth of the heated heavens — only at eve, when the east grows infinite and vague, and the shadows of the waste are one with the increasing shadow of night — then, and then only, from the sullen throats of stone, a music rings to the bronze horizon — a strong, a sombre music, strange and sonorous, like the singing of black stars, or a litany of gods that invoke oblivion; a music that thrills the desert to its heart of adamant, and trembles in the granite of forgotten tombs, till the last echoes of its jubilation, terrible as the trumpets of doom, are one with the black silence of infinity.

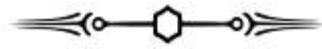
THE GARDEN AND THE TOMB



I KNOW A garden of flowers — flowers lovely and multiform as the orchids of far, exotic worlds — as the flowers of manifold petal, whose colours change as if by enchantment in the alter nation of the triple suns; flowers like tiger lilies from the garden of Satan; like the paler lilies of paradise, or the amaranths on whose perfect and immortal beauty the seraphim so often ponder; flowers fierce and splendid like the crimson or golden flowers of fire; flowers bright and cold as the crystal flowers of snow; flowers whereof there is no likeness in any world of any sun; which have no symbol in heaven or in hell.

Alas! in the heart of the garden is a tomb — a tomb so trellised and embowered with vine and blossom, that the sunlight reveals the ghastly gleam of its marble to no careless or incurious scrutiny. But in the night, when all the flowers are still, and their perfumes are faint as the breathing of children in slumber — then, and then only, the serpents bred of corruption crawl from the tomb, and trail the feter and phosphorescence of their abiding-place from end to end of the garden.

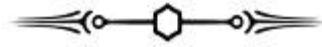
IN COCAIGNE



IT WAS A windless afternoon of April, beneath skies that were tender as the smile of love, when we went forth, you and I, to seek the fabulous and fortunate realm of Cocaigne. Past leafing oaks with foliage of bronze and chrysolite, through zones of yellow and white and red and purple flowers, like a landscape seen through a prism, we fared with hopeful and tremulous hearts, forgetting all save the dream we had cherished.* * * At last we came to the lonely woods, the pines with their depth of balmy, cool, compassionate shadow, which are sacred to the genius of that land. There, for the first time I was bold to take your hand in mine, and led you to a slope where the woodland lilies, with petals of white and yellow ivory, gleamed among the fallen needles. As in a dream, I found that my arms were about you, as in a dream I kissed your yielding lips, and the ardent pallor of your cheeks and throat. Motionless, you clung to me, and a flush arose beneath my kisses like a delicate stain, and lingered softly. Your eyes deepened to my gaze like the brown pools of the forest at evening, and far within them, as in immensity itself, trembled and shone the steadfast stars of your love. As a ship that has wandered beneath stormy suns and disastrous moons, but comes at last to the arms of the shielding harbour, my head lay on the gentle heaving of your delicious breast, and I knew that we had found Cocaigne.

THE LITANY OF THE SEVEN KISSES

I



I KISS THY hands — thy hands, whose fingers are delicate and pale as the petals of the white lotus.

II

I kiss thy hair, which has the lustre of black jewels, and is darker than Lethe, flowing by midnight through the moonless slumber of poppy-scented lands.

III

I kiss thy brow, which resembles the rising moon in a valley of cedars.

IV

I kiss thy cheeks, where lingers a faint flush, like the reflection of a rose upheld to an urn of alabaster.

V

I kiss thine eyelids, and liken them to the purple-veinèd flowers that close beneath the oppression of a tropic evening, in a land where the sunsets are bright as the flames of burning amber.

VI

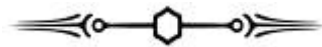
I kiss thy throat, whose ardent pallor is the pallor of marble warmed by the autumn sun.

VII

I kiss thy mouth, which has the savour and perfume of fruits agleam with spray from a magic fountain, in the secret Paradise that we alone shall find; a Paradise whence they that come shall nevermore depart, for the waters thereof are Lethe, and the fruit is the fruit of the tree of Life.

FROM A LETTER

* * * *Will you not join me in Atlantis, where we will go down through streets of blue and yellow marble to the wharves of orichalch, and choose us a galley with a golden Eros for figurehead, and sails of Tyrian sendal? With mariners that knew Odysseus, and beautiful amber-breasted slaves from the mountain-vales of Lemuria, we will lift anchor for the unknown fortunate isles of the outer sea; and, sailing in the wake of an opal sunset, will lose that ancient land in the glaucous twilight, and see from our couch of ivory and satin the rising of unknown stars and perished planets.* * * Perhaps we will not return, but will follow the tropic summer from isle to halcyon isle, across the amaranthine seas of myth and fable: We will eat the lotos, and the fruit of lands whereof Odysseus never dreamt; and drink the pallid wines of faery, grown in a vale of perpetual moonlight. I will find for you a necklace of rosy-tinted pearls, and a necklace of yellow rubies, and crown you with precious corals that have the semblance of sanguine-coloured blossoms. We will roam in the marts of forgotten cities of jasper, and carnelian-built ports beyond Cathay; and I will buy you a gown of peacock azure damascened with copper and gold and vermillion; and a gown of black samite with runes of orange, woven by fantastic sorcery without the touch of hands, in a dim land of spells and philtres.



FROM THE CRYPTS OF MEMORY



AEONS OF AEONS ago, in an epoch whose marvelous worlds have crumbled, and whose mighty suns are less than shadow, I dwelt in a star whose course, decadent from the high, irremeable heavens of the past, was even then verging upon the abyss in which, said astronomers, its immemorial cycle should find a dark and disastrous close.

Ah, strange was that gulf-forgotten star — how stranger than any dream of dreamers in the spheres of to-day, or than any vision that hath soared upon visionaries, in their retrospection of the sidereal past! There, through cycles of a history whose piled and bronze-writ records were hopeless of tabulation, the dead had come to outnumber infinitely the living. And built of a stone that was indestructible save in the furnace of suns, their cities rose beside those of the living like the prodigious metropli of Titans, with walls that overgloom the vicinal villages. And over all was the black funereal vault of the cryptic heavens — a dome of infinite shadows, where the dismal sun, suspended like a sole, enormous lamp, failed to illumine, and drawing back its fires from the face of the irresolvable ether, threw a baffled and despairing beam on the vague remote horizons, and shrouded vistas illimitable of the visionary land.

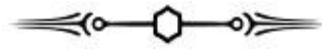
We were a sombre, secret, many-sorrowed people — we who dwelt beneath that sky of eternal twilight, pierced by the towering tombs and obelisks of the past. In our blood was the chill of the ancient night of time; and our pulses flagged with a creeping prescience of the lentor of Lethe. Over our courts and fields, like invisible sluggish vampires born of mausoleums, rose and hovered the black hours, with wings that distilled a malefic languor made from the shadowy woe and despair of perished

cycles. The very skies were fraught with oppression, and we breathed beneath them as in a sepulcher, forever sealed with all its stagnancies of corruption and slow decay, and darkness impenetrable save to the fretting worm.

Vaguely we lived, and loved as in dreams — the dim and mystic dreams that hover upon the verge of fathomless sleep. We felt for our women, with their pale and spectral beauty, the same desire that the dead may feel for the phantom lilies of Hadean meads. Our days were spent in roaming through the ruins of lone and immemorial cities, whose palaces of fretted copper, and streets that ran between lines of carven golden obelisks, lay dim and ghastly with the dead light, or were drowned forever in seas of stagnant shadow; cities whose vast and iron-built fanes preserved their gloom of primordial mystery and awe, from which the simulacra of century-forgotten gods looked forth with unalterable eyes to the hopeless heavens, and saw the ulterior night, the ultimate oblivion. Languidly we kept our gardens, whose grey lilies concealed a necromantic perfume, that had power to evoke for us the dead and spectral dreams of the past. Or, wandering through ashen fields of perennial autumn, we sought the rare and mystic immortelles, with sombre leaves and pallid petals, that bloomed beneath willows of wan and veil like foliage: or wept with a sweet and nepenthe-laden dew by the flowing silence of Acherontic waters.

And one by one we died and were lost in the dust of accumulated time. We knew the years as a passing of shadows, and death itself as the yielding of twilight unto night.

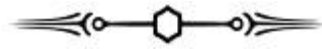
A PHANTASY



I HAVE DREAMT of an unknown land — a land remote in ulterior time, and alien space not ascertainable: the desert of a long-completed past, upon which has settled the bleak, irrevocable silence of infinitude; where all is ruined save the stone of tombs and cenotaphs; and where the sole peoples are the kingless, uncounted tribes of the subterranean dead.

Above this land of my dream, citied with tombs and cenotaphs, a red and smouldering sun maintains a spectral day, in alternation with an ashen moon through the black ether where the stars have long since perished. And through the hush of the consummation of time, above the riven monuments and crumbled records of alien history, flit in the final twilight the mysterious wings of seraphim, sent to fulfill ineffable errands, or confer with demons of the abyss; and black, gigantic angels, newly returned from missions of destruction, pause amid the sepulchers to sift from their gloomy and tremendous vans the pale ashes of annihilated stars.

THE DEMON, THE ANGEL, AND BEAUTY



OF THE DEMON who standeth or walketh always with me at my left hand, I asked: “Hast thou seen Beauty? Her that me-seemeth was the mistress of my soul in Eternity? Her that is now beyond question set over me in Time; even though I behold her not, and, it may be, have never beheld, nor ever shall; her of whose aspect I am ignorant as noon is concerning any star; her of whom as witness and testimony, I have found only the hem of her shadow, or at most, her reflection in a dim and troubled water. Answer, if thou canst, and tell me, is she like pearls, or like stars? Does she resemble most the sunlight that is transparent and unbroken, or the sunlight divided into splendour and iris? Is she the heart of the day, or the soul of the night?”

To which the Demon answered, after, as I thought, a brief space of meditation:

“Concerning this Beauty, I can tell thee but little beyond that which thou knowest. Albeit, in those orbs to which the demons of my rank have admission, there be greater adumbrations of some transcendent Mystery than here, yet have I never seen that Mystery itself, and know not if it be male or female. Aeons ago, when I was young and incautious, when the world was new and bright, and there were more stars than now, I, too was attracted by this Mystery, and sought after it in all accessible spheres. But failing to find the thing itself, I soon grew weary of embracing its shadows, and took to the pursuit of illusions less insubstantial. Now I am become grey and ashen without, and red like old fire within, who was fiery and flame-coloured all through, back in the star-thronged aeons of which I speak: Heed me, for I am as wise, and wary and ancient as the far-travelled

and comet-scarred sun; and I am become of the opinion that the thing Beauty itself does not exist. Doubtless the semblance thereof is but a web of shadow and delusion, woven by the crafty hand of God, that He may snare demons and men therewith, for His mirth, and the laughter of His archangels.”

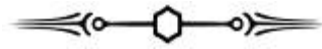
The Demon ceased, and took to watching me as usual — obliquely, and with one eye — an eye that is more red than Aldebaran, and inscrutable as the gulfs beyond the Hyades.

Then of the Angel, who walketh or standeth always with me at my right hand, I asked, “Hast thou seen Beauty? Or hast thou heard any assured rumour concerning Beauty?”

To which the Angel answered, after, as I thought, a moment of hesitation: “As to this Beauty, I can tell thee but little beyond that which thou knowest. Albeit in all the heavens, this Mystery is a topic of the most frequent and sublime speculation among the archangels, and a perennial theme for the more inspired singers and harpists of the cherubim — yea, despite all this, we are greatly ignorant as to its true nature, and substance, and attributes. But sometimes there are mighty adumbrations which cover even the superior seraphim from above their wing-tips, and make unfamiliar twilight in heaven. And sometimes there is an echo which fills the empyrean, and hushes the archangelic harps in the midst of their praising of God. This is not often, and these visitations of echo and shadow spread an awe over the assembled Thrones and Splendours and Dominations, which at other times accompanies only the emanence or appearance of God Himself. Thus are we assured as to the reality of this Beauty. And because it remains a mystery to us, to whom naught else is mysterious except God, we conjecture that it is the thing upon which God meditateth, self-obscured and centred, and because of which He hath held himself immanifest to us for so

many aeons; that this is the secret which God keepeth even from the seraphim.”

THE SHADOWS



THERE WERE MANY shadows in the palace of Augusthes. About the silver throne that had blackened beneath the invisible passing of ages, they fell from pillar and broken roof and fretted window in ever-shifting multiformity. Seeming the black, fantastic spectres of doom and desolation, they moved through the palace in a gradual, grave, and imperceptible dance, whose music was the change and motion of suns and moons. They were long and slender, like all other shadows before the early light, and behind the declining sun; squat and intense beneath the desert noontide, and faint with the withered moon; and in the interlunar darkness, they were as myriad tongues hidden behind the shut and silent lips of night.

One came daily to that place of shadows and desolation, and sate upon the silver throne, watching the shadows that were of desolation. King nor slave disputed him there, in the palace whose kings and whose slaves were powerless alike in the intangible dungeon of centuries. The tombs of unnumbered and forgotten monarchs were white upon the yellow desert roundabout. Some had partly rotted away, and showed like the sunken eye-sockets of a skull — blank and lidless beneath the staring heavens; others still retained the undesecrated seal of death, and were as the closed eyes of one lately dead. But he who watched the shadows from the silver throne, heeded not these, nor the fleet wind that dipt to the broken tombs, and emerged shrilly, its unseen hands dark with the dust of kings.

He was a philosopher, from what land there was none to know or ask. Nor was there any to ask what knowledge or delight he sought in the ruined palace, with eyes alway upon the moving shadows; nor what were the

thoughts that moved through his mind in ghostly unison with them. His eyes were old and sad with meditation and wisdom; and his beard was long and white upon his long white robe.

For many days he came with the dawn and departed with sunset; and his shadow leaned from the shadow of the throne and moved with the others. But one eve he departed not; and thereafter his shadow was one with the shadow of the silver throne. Death found and left him there, where he dwindled into dust that was as the dust of slaves or kings.

But the ebb and reflux of shadows went on, in the days that were before the end; ere the aged world, astray with the sun in strange heavens, should be lost in the cosmic darkness, or, under the influence of other and conflicting gravitations, should crumble apart and bare its granite bones to the light of strange suns, and the granite, too, should dissolve, and be as of the dust of slaves and kings. Noon was encircled with darkness, and the depths of palace-dusk were chasmed with sunlight. Change there was none, other than this, for the earth was dead, and stirred not to the tottering feet of time. And in the expectant silence before the twilight of the sun, the moving shadows seemed but a mockery of change; a meaningless antic phantasmagoria of things that were; an afterfiguring of forgotten time.

And now the sun was darkened slowly in mid-heaven, as by some vast and invisible bulk. And twilight hushed the shadows in the palace of Augusthes, as the world itself swung down toward the long and single shadow of irretrievable oblivion.

Sandalwood (1925)



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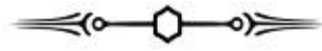
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Semblance



Love was the flight of a crimson bird
Across the forest of your soul,
Where cypress-leaf and cypress-bole,
By mordant airs of autumn stirred,
Sigh with a long and sea-like word.

Joy was the burning heart-red bloom
A fair and wandering witch let fall
At twilight from her coronal,
Where mottling ivies mesh the tomb
Lost in a laurel-given gloom.

Time is the drip of fountain-spray
Upon the unbroken sword you flung
Amid the pouting poppies young
In a lost garden far away,
Where the white girls of Circe lay.

Life is a house of painted stone
Reflected in a sunless lake,
Where drowning domes and turrets shake
In the black winds for ever blown
From shoreless tides no sail has known.

Grief is the mirror-built hall
Wherein you roam eternally,

Seeking the ghost you shall not see
In sorrow half-sardonical —
And meet yourself at every wall.

The Song of Aviol



Past the flown horizon's wall
And the flight of any wind —
Where the sunken sunsets fall,
Lies the land that Love would find.

There, among the magic palms,
They that flee the mists of sorrow
Watch their woe on wingèd balms
Borne and lost ere any morrow.

There, in vales of deathless lote,
Love is made the Dream Eternal —
One with all the myrrhs that float
'Neath the halted sun hesternal.

Land that kings may not discover,
Deep within the mystic west !
Only lover comes with lover
Through the fens where dragons nest.

They that seek it, summer-hearted,
Must outwing the winter swallow —
Fu too far in realms uncharted
For the jealous gods to follow.

Past the flown horizon's wall
And the flight of any wind —

Where the sunken sunsets fall,
Lies the land that Love would find.

We Shall Meet (I)



We shall meet
Once again
In the strange and latter summers,
And recall,
Like olden mummers,
An old play of love and pain.

I shall greet
You not with kisses
Of the days aforetime, knowing
These would fall
Vain as those of phantoms blowing
Nightward to the last abysses.

Faint perfume
Will attend you
Like a scrine-imprisoned myrrh;
And my dreaming
Heart where fallen autumns stir
Half their fallen light will lend you.

From the tomb
Love shall rise
Mutely, in a specter's fashion,
To the seeming

Lamps for ever bleak and ashen
Of our necromantic eyes.

But no tear
Shall we weep,
Knowing tears are void and vain,
Like the scattered
Drops of rain
On a desert's lion sleep.

Chill and sere,
Like the grass
Flaffing in a field of snow,
We shall know that nothing mattered,
As we tell our faded woe
Ere we pass.

Forgotten Sorrow



A stranger grief than any grief by music told
Is mine: regret for unremembered loves, and faces
Veiled by the night of some unknown farewell, or places
Lost in the dusty ebb and lapse of kingdoms old
On the slow desert, rises vague and manifold
Within my heart at summer twilight. Through the spaces
Of all oblivion, voidly then my soul retraces
Her dead lives given to the marbles and the mould
In dim Palmyra, or some pink, enormous city
Whose falling columns now the boles of mightier trees
Support in far Siam... All grievous love, and pity,
All loveliness unheld for long, and long estranged,
Appeals with voices, indistinguishably changed,
Like bells in deep Atlantis, tolled by summer seas.

Departure



Departing autumn trails
Her scarf of mist adown the morning vales;
Enmeshed like faery sequins in its fold,
Gleam the last leaves of gold.

You Are Not Beautiful



You are not beautiful; but, ah, too long
I sought, and found a slowly growing grace;
Till fairer now than beauty is your face,
And all your silence dearer than a song.

Query



This doubtful love has slumbered long —
At most, a shadow-mobled flame,
The murmur of a muted song;
And scarce will tell its rightful name
Lest love should do our friendship wrong.

Fair comrade, have you found, as I,
A tremor in some troubling vein
When shoulders touch, the subtle sigh
That is not grief, that is not pain,
And vague delight in being nigh?

Have you, as I, the peril known
Of loitering where the leaves of fall,
Like tatters torn from dryads flown,
Have made, beneath the pines' black pall,
A secret, splendid bed and lone

Sweet friend, would you my silence have —
A silence wrought of hushed desire?
Or speech wherein like some long wave
The riven deeps of love aspire?
Sweet friend, would you my silence have?

Can you, or I, a lover find,
And keep the tender friend that is ?

With closing arms our friendship bind,
Affirm the hand-clasp with a kiss —
And lose not more than lovers find ?

This doubtful love has slumbered long —
At most, a shadow-mobled flame,
The murmur of a muted song;
And scarce will tell its rightful name,
Lest love should do our friendship wrong.

Enigma



Across thy face a glimmer passes —
Wrought by what far and hidden flame?
Say, is it loveliness, or love,
Or light of sunken moons remembered
From gardens none shall name?

There is a secret shadow clinging
Closely between thy lips of red:
Is it the grief of new desire?
Or half-forgotten darkness lulling
Sorrowful loves long dead?

Incognita



Haply I shall not know, as others know,
The face you have given to the fumbling sun,
That sculptor of chaotic night; and none
May share what loveliness the shadows show
To me, nor watch the curious cameo
Of your archaic brows against the moon —
A tarnished empress on a broad doubloon,
Flame-edged and glowing. Each must ever go
In the sealed world of his peculiar sense,
And this your beauty with diverse phantasms
People the swirl of all impermanence
For our diverse perception... Virginal
You are, and vaguely loved, if loved at all,
For in the closest kiss are unknown chasms.

The Secret



Like a word
Of an archetypal tongue,
Never told,
Never sung;

All unstirred,
Like the corals of the deep
In their cold
and purple sleep;

Lost and far,
Like a forest-folded bloom
Lulled above
Its own perfume;

Like a star
In the nether darkness drowned,
Lies the love
We have not found.

The End of Autumn



Spent autumn wanes; the leaf
Forsakes the vine, as from her coronal
The gems might fall,
Forgot by some mad empress in her grief.

Now, from the sycamores,
A ruinous and crumpled bronze is cast;
Grown sere at last,
The reeds lie broken on the river-shores.

Now, from the outland peaks,
The ghostly snows crawl downward on the blue;
Gone forth anew,
For huger suns the southering autumn seeks.

Decembral stars return
In long blue twilights to the eastern hill;
But, lost and still,
In high ravines her flameless embers burn.

Bleak with the winter's breath,
A wind comes down; fantastic skeletons
Of steel and bronze,
Creak the cold willows in a dance of death.

The Love-Potion



Sluggish drops of sullen balm;
Blood-red wine from fruits of bane,
Subtly mixed with polar snows
Melted in a harlot's palm;
Attar from the firstling rose
On the grave of lovers slain:

Featly find and featly bring
These, to make the magistral
Fraught with clear, unholy fire,
That shall end the languishing
Of a queen, and rouse desire
In a heart funereal.

The Song of Cartha



Queen, whose perilous bosom bare
Was the field of love's emprise,
I would hush my weary sighs
In the silence of thy hair.

In my heart thy kisses wrought
Raptures of the fabled faun;
Seal my lids before the dawn
With thy lips, and lift them not.

Queen, whose breasts were mine to keep
Through the moon-abandoned night,
Languid love and dead delight
In thine arms are fain to sleep.

Afterwards



There is a silence in the world
Since we have said farewell;
And beauty with an alien speech
An alien tale would tell.

There is a silence in the world,
Which is not peace nor quiet:
Ever I seek to flee therefrom,
And walk the ways of riot.

But when I hear the music moan
In rooms of thronging laughter,
A tongueless demon drives me forth,
And silence follows after.

Contradiction



I have calmed me with the thought of nothingness —
who know that none shall evermore escape
From the world's dream and stand illusionless.

In fancy I have leaned from Lethe's edge —
Knowing the driven dust will pass again
When the tomb has broke its sealed and marble pledge.

And I have smiled at the idleness of love —
Who find the swords of your unforgotten beauty
Posted before, behind me, and above.

The Last Oblivion



Not while the woods are redolent with spring,
Or scentless immortelles of autumn blow,
Shall I evade your loveliness, or know
Surcease of love and love's remembering.

But haply wandering, worlds and cycles hence,
Through unforeseen fantastic avatars,
I shall forget you in the future stars,
And take of time an alien recompense.

Till in some strange and latter planet, wrought
From molten shards and meteor-dust of this,
My hand shall pluck an unsuspected bloom

That lifts again the scarlet of your kiss;
And I shall muse and loiter, knowing not
The love that perished like a lost perfume.

Autumn Orchards



Walled with far azures of the wintering year,
Late autumn on a windless altar burns;
Splendid as rubies from Sabeen urns,
A holocaust of hues is gathered here.

The pear-trees lift a Tyrian tinged with blood;
Strange purples brighten in the smouldering plums;
The fire-red gold of peach and cherry comes
To storm the bronzing borders of the wood.

Rich as the pyre of some Hesperian queen,
Feeding the ultimate sunset with sad fires,
Is this, where beauty with her doom conspires
To tell in flame what death and beauty mean.

O, loveliness grown tragical and dear!
My heart has taken from the torchful leaf
A swiftly soaring glory, and the grief
Of love is colored like the dying year.

Remembrance



Memory has in fee
A land where fallen suns
Illume the light and fragile bronze
Of autumn leaves unchangingly.
Memory has in fee
A land of fallen suns.

Memory knows the face
Of one who wanders there,
Tranquil and tall, for ever fair
With dreamful, slow, mysterious grace:
Memory knows her face,
Supremely pale and fair.

Memory sees the sky
In her blue eyes alone;
And all the forest-bronze is flown,
Lost in her hair eternally:
Memory finds the sky
In her blue eyes alone.

Memory takes her hand
Across the lonesome years —
And all the ancient stream of tears
Has ceased within an autumn land:

Memory takes her hand
Across forgotten tears.

The Wingless Archangels



Beyond the bourn of dreams, their fortunate sphere,
Golden and large in some rich galaxy,
Rolls upon ways prolonged of harmony;
And they, with wingless toil of many a year,
Unto the calm of heavens have clomb anear —
Wise with the secrets of eternity,
And forcing truce with time... They deem them free
From change, and from the old, unchanging fear.

But on their immortality is blight —
Whose dream betraying deserts have undone:
They turn, where winds make chill the ashen light,
Blown as from space and bleak oblivion;
And mark the dim, portentous breath of Night,
A mist penumbral on the noontide sun.

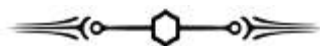
Moon-Dawn



The hills, a-throng with swarthy pine,
Press up the pale and hollow sky,
And the squat cypresses on high
Reach from the lit horizon-line

They reach, they reach, with gnarlèd hands —
Malignant hags, obscene and dark —
While the red moon, a demons' ark,
Is borne along the mystic lands.

Lunar Mystery



O'er gardens lulled with ghostly light
In music leaned the languorous moon,
The burden of the murmured night.

Where amaranthine lilies wore,
In lofty pallor fully blown,
An ivory silence evermore,

Bemused, I saw the night's white song,
The flowers' moon-measured lullaby,
Its visible pale rune prolong.

Then, to my spelled, reluctant ear,
A whisper louder than the light
Pierced as from alien presence near;

Till half I deemed to shortly see
A silver seraph of the moon,
Or star-shape harping mystery.

But wingless yet the midnight seemed,
The garden footless to my gaze,
Save for a wind that briefly gleamed

Upon the pensive-packed hours,
And moonlight fluttering like a moth
Amid the swayed, enormous flowers.

Enchanted Mirrors



These are enchanted mirrors that I bring,
By demons wrought from metals of the moon
To burnished forms of lune or plenilune:
Therein are faery faces vanishing,
And warm Pompeiian phantoms lovelier
Than mortal flesh or marble; and the gleam
Of suns that from Saturnia rose in dream
And sank on golden worlds that never were.

Therein you shall behold unshapen dooms,
And ghoul-astounding shadows of the tombs;
Oblivion, with eyes like poppy-buds,
Or love, with blossoms plucked in Devachan,
In stillness of the santal-pillared woods;
But nevermore the moiling world of man.

Duality



Thy soul is like a secret garden-close,
Where roots of cleft mandragoras enwreath;
Where bergamot and fumitory breathe,
And ivy winds its tower with the rose.

The lolling weeds of Lethe, green or wan,
Exhale their fatal languors on the light;
From out infernal grails of aconite
Poisons and dewes are proffered to the dawn.

Here, when the moon's phantasmal fingers grope
To find the marbles of a hidden tomb,
There sings the cypress-perched nightingale;

And all the silver-bellied serpents pale
Their ruby eyes amid the blossoms ope,
To lift and listen in the ghostly gloom.

A Valediction



Though the blown leaves arise and go,
The pines remain;
Though love and all his raptures pass,
Abideth pain.

Slowly I kiss thy muted mouth,
And turn in sorrow:
Perchance the closing earth will press
Thereon tomorrow.

Selenique



Perfect, marmoreal, curved and carven statue-wise,
Your hard immaculate beauty dulls the sharpness of desire,
And chills it to a changeless passion —
A frozen passion bright and pallid,
And clear as is the ghostly fervor of the moon's white fire.
And all the dreams of you are lunar dreams —
Such bright and hueless visions as are born
Of moonset on autumnal meres forlorn,
Where the white lotus lingers,
Unstirred with full and fragile petals overblown
That the least wave would loosen
And shatter like the touch of fingers;
While the high clouds upon the western hills,
Immobile, rest like towering palaces
And mausoleums wrought of dim fantastic stone.

Alienage



Dear one, what do we here ?
Petal by petal falls the alien spring
In gardens where we pass ungarlanded,
And seek once more the doves and myrtles dead
In some retrieveless year;
And claim no leaf or blossom for our own...
O Paphos, and the moons of Paphos flown !
My golden dove, canst thou recall
Nights when delight was all,
And high desire could still outlive the dawn ?
Hast thou forgot,
Here, in the grey, sad world that knows us not,
The years when we were nymph and centaur, drawn
To elder forests deep
That spring had turned to chrysolite and gold ?
Hast thou forgot the tale of kisses told
By summer waters calm as sleep,
When Hesperèan sunsets touched thy hair
From islands lost and fair ?

Dear one, what do we here ?
Beyond the window-pane
The shifting veils of rain
Bedim the bitter world that is not ours;
And on dishevelled flowers

There falls a hueless twilight, brief and drear...
Give me thy lips again —
Let us forget the weariness and pain,
And the supreme disaster of our birth,
While in thy flesh my lingering
Slow kisses move and cling
And love alone hath verity or worth.
Ah, let me find, about thy bosom's fruit,
The fragile, vague perfume
Of unseen lilies crushed within the gloom
Of forests lone and old;
Ah, let me seek in leisured long pursuit
Amid thy harvest-colored hair,
For suns and summers of remembered gold;
And seal my lips on throat and bosom fair,
Till where my kisses fell, the phantom rose
Of Paphos blows.

Adventure



Let us leave the hateful town
With its stale, forgotten lies;
Far beneath renewing skies,
Where the piny slope goes down,
All with April love and laughter —
None to leer and none to frown —
We shall pass and follow after
Shattered lace of waters spun
On a steep and stony loom
Down the depths of laurel-gloom.
Finding there a world re-made
In the fern-embowered shade,
Weaving bright oblivion
Still from frailest blossom-trove,
We shall mix our wilding love
With the woodland and the sun.

Let us loiter, hand in hand,
Hearing but the heart's command,
Half our steps by kisses stayed,
Prove the spring-enchanted glade;
Breast to breast and limb to limb,
Seize our happiness and bind it —
Lose the pulse of time and find it,
Free as vagrant seraphim.

Ever leave regret and rue
To the dutiful and jealous
Fools that are not near to tell us
All the things we should not do.

Though the bedded ferns be broken,
And dishevelled blossoms lie
On the rumpled moss for token
Of the day's mad errantry —
Still the tacit pines will keep
Darkly in their sighing sleep
All the sweet and perilous story;
And the oaks and willows hoary
For unheeding ears will tell
Only things ineffable;
And the later eyes that look
On the pool-delaying brook,
Shall not see within its glass
Two that came to kiss and pass.

Plum-Flowers

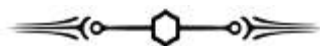


On boughs a-tremble with the rain,
The blown white flowers of the plum
Their fragile hold awhile retain.

And though tempestuous tears have come
Between us, and a startled moan
From mouths that kisses have made dumb —

Still, still, the gentler tears atone,
And still we keep our April love,
Like poising petals all unflown.

Minatory



Scorners of the Muse, beware !
She that you deny is queen
Of a thunder-girt demesne
In the worlds of Otherwhere:
Ships that ply on shadowy seas
Past the surging galaxies,
Bring the loot of heaven and hell
To her stellar citadel;
Powers benignant and malign
In her single service join,
Cherubim and seraphim
Wait upon her briefest whim;
Gods august you have not known
Gather to her awful throne,
Demons that you wot not of
Serve her with a fearful love;
Dim Summanus, lord of night,
Is her moiling minister,
Demogorgon toils for her
In the darkling Infinite.

Maya



Fools of the world, who dream that dreams are true —
Believing still that life is what it seems,
And trustful that the world is more than dreams —
Free for a little, I have laughed at you:
Knowing all this a ghostly gossamer
In some eternal room of darkness spun;
A laughter of forgotten gods that were,
Echoing still in waste oblivion.

But once again, as others, I have lent
myself to earthly ways and earthly walls:
Illusion of illusion, fantasy
Of doubtful phantoms, nevermore to be
When slumber on the last delirium falls
And lulls the tossing shadows turbulent.

Interrogation



Love, will you look with me
Upon the phosphor-litten labor of the worm —
Time's minister, who toils for his appointed term,
And has for fee
All superannuate loves, and all the loves to be ?

Love, can you see, as I,
The corpses, ghosts and demons mingled with the crowd?
The djinns that men have freed, grown turbulent and proud?
Alastor, Asmodai?
And all-unheeded envoys from the stars on high?

Know you the gulfs below,
Where darkling Erebus on Erebus is driven
Between the molecules-atom from atom riven,
And tossing to and fro,
Incessant, like the souls on Dante's wind of woe?

Know you the deeps above ?
The terror and vertigo of those who gaze too long
Upon the crystal slices unclouded? Are you strong
With me to prove
Even in thought or dream the dreadful pits above?

Know you the gulfs within ?
The larvae, the minotaurs of labyrinths undared ?

The somber foam of seas by cryptic sirens shared ?

The pestilence and sin

Borne by the flapping shroud of liches met within ?

Consolation



Forget, forget, and be not sorrowful at all!
Ah, tend no more, in gardens of the terrene years,
This wormwood flowering tall with thy mellifluous tears.

Be glad! A fairer blossom blooms, chimerical,
A golden rose eloigned with vale on vale of blue
In realms beyond the sunset bourn of Xanadu.

Be glad! though here the skies are like a leaden wall!
For still in Saturn, from their isle septentrion,
The black swans fly to seek the jungles of the sun.

Forget, forget, and be not sorrowful at all!

A Meeting



When all the splendour wanes
Like a slow sunset from the changeful leaves,
And the grey time of rains
With hooded dawns and eves
Approaches, I shall come to you once more,
Some afternoon of sun and sunlit cloud
And knocking at your door
Await your soft and murmurous tread, scarce heard
For sudden pulses loud
By long desire and many memories stirred...
So you will come, and we shall meet again,
After the going-down of many days,
The death of many dreams;
Under the gracious heavens of your gaze
My heart shall lie as some autumnal land
Fulfilled with aureate light and azure haze,
The while we speak of themes
Familiar, or recall forgotten things —
Telling of autumn and the fallen flow'rs,
And the fled wings —
Lest love usurp our straitly guarded lips,
And the irrevocable word be said
That ends the wordless hours...

Unheard, like petals shed
In fields of poppy-bloom,
The moments fall and turn to memories
Though Love foresees
Here, in the sunlit room,
The ultimate night and silence of his doom.
But not too heavily the burden weighs,
While your sweet gaze
Lingers upon me like a tranquil light,
And all the murmured music of your voice
Becomes an echo for the songless days.
And heart and soul rejoice,
Knowing your presence for a little while,
But dare not tell
how love has made this hour ineffable,
And dare not tell the dearness of your smile.

The Barrier



In the desire of welded lips,
Of heart on prone tumultuous heart,
Abides no stronger thing than this
Dread love that keeps our lips apart.

Between us lies an ancient fear;
Before me, in thy troubled eyes,
A shadow flees as flees the nymph,
Tremulous with the faun's surprise.

Hard silence like a stifling hand
Withholds the word we fain would say;
Over us lies the dreamt caress
Transfixèd with a dear dismay.

When shall the passion of the faun
Resistless in my heart arise,
And take the warm and trembling nymph
That flees within thy startled eyes ?

Apologia



O gentlest love, I have not played
For you upon the lute of jade;
Nor on that fabulous bassoon
Wrought from the horns of minotaurs,
And set with subtly changing spars
And lucid metals of the moon —

The thing my childish fingers found
Cast on a god-frequented ground,
And unto whose compelling note
Sprang the brown dryad from her tree,
And palest vampires came to me
With limbs more sweet than trodden lote.

I have not made such melodies
As call the philtered sorceries:
But I will weave, some autumn day,
A song to make your beauty mine —
Wrought not with mystical design
And chords of passionate dismay.

For I will tell, with wonted words,
A tale of two that autumn birds
Had led beneath oblivious skies,
Who plucked the wilding asters rare,

And peered from grasses like your hair
To distance blue as your blue eyes.

Estrangement



I have forgot, who once had part
In autumn and in autumn's grief;
Still the red year illumines the leaf,
But not the silence of my heart.

When poplars take the passing fire
And fling it on the windy skies,
I listen, hushed with lone surmise,
In hope to hear a vanished lyre.

Bravely, on some autumnal morrow,
The topmost leaf shall flame and die;
But in my heart an alien sigh
Wakes only with an alien sorrow.

In vain the falling leaves caress
A lute among the roses lost;
And the frail touch of petals tossed
Will leave it mute and tremorless.

Loss



Once, I could find you in my dreams;
Your swaying breasts were apples bright
In somber sinful crofts of night;
You were the laughter-footed sprite
Who led me on by waning streams,
You were the nymph who called my name
From fountains of forlorn extremes.
But still, however far and fast
You lied, our lips would meet at last
In vales eloigned from time and shame.

Alas! I cannot find you now:
From alp to phantom alp in sleep
A phantom light they cannot keep
Goes outward to the oblivious deep,
And fades from my pursuing brow.
Lost in a wood of shadowy leaf,
Vain laughter dies, I know not how —
Remote, alone and unredeemed;
And I forget the dream I dreamed,
And sadden with evasive grief.

A Catch



O mouth by many kissed,
O heart that all might capture!
How art thou fain and mournful
For love that love has missed —

For all clear weal and pain
Lost now to love for ever,
Though kings may take their tribute
And reapers take the grain.

Don Juan Sings



Lightly kiss and lightly pass
Ere the sleeping Love shall wake;
Nimble-footed, lean and take
Blossoms from a blind morass.

Past the dragon coiled in slumber,
Steal, and filch his guarded gold,
Taking all your hands may hold
And your hasty glances number.

Shadowy breasts and breasts of snow
Bear the rounded fruits of pleasure;
Taste them all, nor seek to treasure
Aught that turns to dust and woe.

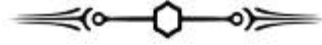
Somber locks and tresses fair,
In them all your fingers tangle;
Leave them lest your heart should strangle
In a noose of woman's hair.

On Re-Reading Baudelaire



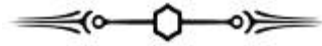
Forgetting still what holier lilies bloom
Secure within the garden of lost years,
We water with the fitfulness of tears
Wan myrtles with an acrid sick perfume;
Lethean lotus, laurels of our doom,
Dark amarant with tall unswaying spears,
Await funereal autumn and its fears
In this grey land that sullen suns illumine.
Ivy and rose and hellebore we twine.
Voluptuous as love, or keen as grief,
Some fleeing fragrance lures us in the gloom
To Paphian dells or vales of Proserpine...
But all the flowers, with dark or pallid leaf,
Become at last a garland for the tomb.

Nineteen Poems from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



A Parisian Dream

I



To pleasure me, in this dark dawn,
A far and terrible paradise,
Fading, has left within mine eyes
The dazzlement of light withdrawn.

Slumber is full of miracles!
Forbidden by mine own decree,
No unconforming blade or tree
In this diviner vision dwells,

And I, proud sculptor of a world,
Grow drunken with the monotone
Of metal, water, flame and stone
At my fantastic will unfurled.

Babel of stairs and of arcades,
There is a palace infinite
With countless pools, and fountains bright
Falling on golden dark estrades;

Where, from the ramparts far and high,
Enormous cataracts have sprung,
Like heavy crystal curtains hung
On brazen walls within the sky.

No bowers, but lines of columns tall
By sleeping tarns surrounded there,
With mirrored naiadès that bare
Huge breasts and limbs titanical.

Blue waters endlessly are whirled
Between the quays of malachite
And quays of sard, that run in light
A million leagues athwart the world —

A world of waves chimerical,
And stone undreamt-of; shore and sea,
A dazzling cold immensity
Reflecting and redoubling all!

In silence, from the vault beyond,
Great rivers negligently turn
The treasure of each teeming urn
Adown the gulfs of diamond.

An architect of Fäery,
Through lofty caverns roofed and walled
With ruby and with emerald,
I drive the tamed, obedient sea.

Pale, black or irised, all things gleam
like burnished Orient mirrors clear;
Colossal gems of sea and mere
Are set in the crystallizèd beam.

And yet no alien star, nor light
left by the sun in nether skies
Has shone upon these prodigies —
Self-lit in lusters infinite!

On all the shifting gramarie
Hovers (O, dreadful strange demesne
Where naught is heard and all is seen!)
The silence of eternity.

II

Opening eyes replete with fire,
I see my hovel's horror plain,
And feel re-entering in my brain
The fang of cares accurst and dire;

Funeral, slow, the pendulum
Tolls brutally the lapse of noon,
And darkness pours from heaven too soon
On the sad world forlorn and numb.

Semper Eadem



“Ah, tell me, whence has risen thy strange melancholy,
Mounting as ocean mounts upon a bare, black reef?”

— When time has trampled out the vintage of our folly,
Life is an evil thing! This is a common grief,

An all-too-simple secret each in turn must prove,
And plain at last for all, as joy is plain for thee.
Therefore be mute, and search no more, my curious love —
Too sweet thy voice to ask this bitter thing of me.

Be mute — and still be ignorant! soul enravished ever!
Mouth of the childish laugh For life enchains us never
With bonds more strong, more subtle than the bonds of doom.

Ah let, ah, let my heart, grown drunken still with lies,
Plunge far into that summer dreamland of thine eyes,
Or sleep long-time beneath thy lashes golden gloom!

The Ideal



No, not among the meager beauties of vignettes,
The autumn-tainted fruit of a century's decline,
The buskined feet, the fingers hung with castanets,
Can I assuage a heart exorbitant as mine.

I leave to Gavarni, the poet of chloroses,
His warbling troupe of charmers sick that pale and tremble,
For never have I found among these fainting roses
One single flower that doth my red ideal resemble.

Needful wert thou to illumine his abysmal heart,
Lady Macbeth, thou spirit strong in crime, who art
An Aeschylean bloom on boreal shores and dim;

Or better thou, great Night, the child of Angelo,
In a strange posture turning peacefully, to show
Thy beauty fashioned for the mouths of Anakim.

The Giantess



In times when Nature, filled with fervor limitless,
Conceived and brought to birth many a monstrous child,
I fain had dwelt anigh to some young giantess,
Even as lies a cat, voluptuous and mild,

At a queen's feet. Full happily I would have seen
Her soul and body burgeoning in dreadful games;
Divining if her heart behind the matutine
Mists of her eyes concealed a sun of somber flames.

I would have roamed her mighty rondures at mine ease;
Crawled on the thighward slope of her enormous knees;
Or when at whiles, by summer-swollen suns oppressed,

She laid along the field her weary hugeness down,
I would have slumbered in the shadow of one breast
As at a mountain's foot a still and peaceful town.

The Venal Muse (La Muse Vénale)



Muse of my heart, who lovest well the palace hall,
Wilt have, when boreal winds through January blow,
During the black ennui of evenings drowned with snow,
A brand or brazier for thy feet purpureal!

Wilt thou re-animate thy shoulders marble-cold
In the nocturnal rays that pierce the shuttered pane?
Feeling thy purse go dry, thy palace crumble, gain
From azure vaults of nigh the long-inviolate gold?

Thou needest, that thine evening bread be given still,
To swing among the choir the sacred thurible,
And sing Te Deums in most solemn unbelief;

Or, starveling mountebank, deploy thy loveliness
And laughter drenched with tears of all-unknown distress,
To charm the vulgar herd's ignoble spleen and grief.

Examination At Midnight



The pendulum, with brazen din,
Proclaims the midnight; we begin
To call to mind, ironically,
What uses we have made of this
Dead day that drops to the abyss:
Today — O, date prophetic,
Friday, thirteenth, in somber folly
Maugre the truth our heart maintains,
We, seeing still the light that sains,
Have walked in ways heretical.

We have blasphemed the might of Jesus,
The most irrefutable Lord,
And like a parasite at the board
Of some abominable Croesus,
To please the monstrous animal,
True servitor of Asmodai,
We have denied and flouted all
The things we love, repeatedly,
And all the things that we despise
Greeted with slavish flattery;
A servile executioner,
Bemoaned the wrong of our mesprise;
Bowed to immense Stupidity,
Stupidity, the minotaur;

Kissed with devotion prodigal
The brainless Matter's red and white,
And praised the dim phosphoric light
That is corruption's final pall.

Likewise, to drown the vertigo
Of vision, dream and dolor febrile,
We, the proud servant of the Lyre,
The Lyre whose glory is to show
The drunkenness of things funebral,
Again have drunk with no desire,
Have eaten still with no delight.
Swiftly blow out the lamp, for we
Would shroud us in the secrecy
And dark indifference of night!

La Musique (Music)



Music full often lifts me like a swelling sea!
After my star long-flown,
Through vaulted brume or ethers of immensity
I set my sail, alone.

With bosom forward borne, suspiring to the wind
Like the great cloth outblown,
I climb the ridges of the piling billows blind
Through veils of night unknown.

I feel vibrate in me the torture and revulsion
Of a storm-torn caravel;
The soft wind, or monsoon with thunderous long convulsion,

Cradles me on the swell
That is, at other times, the mirror calm and fair
Of my supreme despair.

Hymn to Beauty



Fallest thou from the heavens, or soarest from the abyss,
O Beauty? Thy regard infernal and divine
Pours out, in vast confusion, crime and benefice,
And therefore one might well compare thee unto wine.

The sunset and the dawn in thy deep eyes are holden;
Thou sheddest forth perfumes like a tempestuous eve;
Thy mouth, a philtered amphora, doth the child embolden,
And heroes fail in the web thy slow caresses weave.

Comest thou from the black profound, or stars above?
Destiny, like a god, follows thy scented gown;
Sowing, all chancefully, disaster, joy and love,
Thou art the imperatrix of all, the slave of none.

Thou tramplest on the dead with mockeries eternal;
Horror is half thy jewel-laden rosary;
And Murder is a precious amulet infernal
That on thy bosom burns and trembles amorously.

The ephemera flies to hail thee, candle of all our night,
And flaming dies, in adoration of its doom;
The lover leans toward the breast of his delight
Even as a dying man, fain to caress his tomb.

Be thou from hell or heaven, say, what matters it,
O Beauty! fearful sphinx ingenuous, if alone

Thy foot, thine eye, thy smile, unbar the Infinite
Which I have always loved and never yet have known?

Angel or sorceress, from God or Lucifer,
What matter — O my fay with velvet eyes — if thus
Thou renderest, by rhythm, gleam and flying myrrh,
The world less execrable and time less burdensome?

Exotic Perfume (Parfum Exotique)



At autumn eve, with pillowed lips and closing eyes,
I breathe the perfumes of thy sultry bosom bare,
And find again the forfeit, warm, Lethean air
Of isles eloigned in sleep beneath enchanted skies;

Where the far-lifted suns flame-heavy and unfalling
Illume strange arbours pleached with many-savoured fruit,
That arch the simple love and passion absolute
Of sinewy men and candid girls who need no calling.

Yea, wafted on thy body's perfume, I have flown
And sought the port where many prows are met together,
Borne by the black monsoon to find a golden weather;

And subtly there my calm and cradled sense is haunted
By airs compounding the green spice of trees unknown
In one slow philtre with the songs by sailors chanted.

From *The Measure*, April 1925

Reprinted in *Sandalwood* (as "Parfum Exotique"), but not included in
Selected Poems

Note: Text is from a tearsheet of *THE MEASURE* corrected in Smith's
handwriting.

Moesta et Errabunda



Agatha, say is thy heart not often fain to go,
Far from the somber city's black and impure sea,
To another ocean where the splendors fall and flow
All blue, profound and clear as is virginity?
Agatha, say, is thy heart not often fain to go?

The sea, the sempiternal sea, consoles our pain!
What kindly demon gave to this enchantress hoarse,
Who sings to the grumbling organs of the hurricane,
Her power to cradle us like some titanic nurse?
The sea, the sempiternal sea, consoles our pain!

O wagon, carry me! frigate, waft me, far away!
For here the mud is made of human tears and dust!
Will the sad heart of Agatha not often say:
'From crimes and from remorse, from sorrow and from lust,
O wagon, carry me, frigate, waft me, far away'?

How art thou flown from us, O perfumed paradise,
Where, 'neath a cloudless azure, only love and joy
Abide, and those we love are worthy, fair and wise!
Where the heart drowns in pure delights that never cloy!
How art thou flown from us, O perfumed paradise!

But the green paradise of childish amorettes,
The games, the songs, the kisses, and the gathered flowers,

The flasks of wine that lengthened out the warm sunsets,
The throbbing violins, the silence of the bowers —
But the green paradise of childish amorettes,

The fangless paradise, replete with hidden joys,
Is it already more remote than Taprobane?
Can one recall it with a supplicating voice,
Or with an argent music make it live again —
The guileless paradise, replete with hidden joys?

Doubtful Skies



Thine eyes are opals through some veiling vapor seen:
Mysterious changeful, are they blue or grey or green?
Dream they of death or love? or are they but the glass
Where languidly the pale and indolent heavens pass?

Thou dost recall the muffled mornings, cool and wan,
When into tears dissolve the hearts by sorcery drawn;
When, darkly wring and tortured by some unknown ill,
The nerves too wakeful mock the soul that slumbers still.

And sometimes thou art like the horizon-land whereon
Strange lusters kindle to the mist-enfolded sun...
O splendor of a storm-wet dale suddenly bright
Under a sunset heaven where fires and clouds unite.

O dangerous woman! doubtful and seductive clime!
Must I adore likewise thy latter snow and rime,
And, drawn from love's implacable winter, shall I feel
The pleasures more acute than pointed glass and steel?

The Fountain of Blood



It seems my blood is a sealed but ever-rippling fount:
Deep in a sunless court the rhythmic sobbings mount.
Full well I hear it always, murmurously flowing;
But still the stanchless primal wound is past my knowing.

Across a city walled, as in some garden-close,
Turning the streets to islets, evermore it goes,
A glad, vermillion Lethe; none is thirsty there,
And roseate is the earth, and roseate is the air.

Often I have demanded from the captious wine
One day of slumber for the toiling mole of Fear:
Wine makes the vision clearer, liner still the ear!

I have sought in love a sleep oblivious and divine —
But love for me is a mattress that sharp needles fill,
Whereon, for thirsty girls, my blood pours many a rill.

Evening Harmony



Now, see! the time is come when solemnly and slow
The flowers on their stem like shaken censers fume;
When sounds and odors, trembling, turn upon the gloom:
A melancholy valse, a languorous vertigo!

The flowers on their stem like shaken censers fume;
The violin's a heart all tremulous with woe;
A melancholy valse, a languorous vertigo!
The fair, sad heavens like a darkling altar loom.

The violin's a heart all tremulous with woe,
A tender heart, that hates the nothingness of doom;
The fair, sad heavens like a darkling altar loom;
Drowned in his frozen blood, the sun lies far and low.

A tender heart, that hates the nothingness of doom,
Re-culls each faint and fallen gleam from the long ago;
Drowned in his frozen blood, the sun lies far and low;
In me thy memory like a monstrance doth relume.

The Spiritual Dawn



When breaks upon the debauchee the sworded morn,
Leagued with the Ideal that gnaws as gnaws a mordant worm,
Some dark and vengeful mystery fulfills its term,
And a grieving angel from the sodden beast is born.

In their attainless blue the spiritual skies,
For the downfallen dreamer prostrate in the pit,
Open and gape with the gulf's allurements infinite.
O dear and pure and lucid Goddess, in like wise,

Above the foully fuming wrack of orgies stale,
Thy memory more clear, more roseate and fair
Floats on my vision and reveals a larger air;

The sun has blackened all the blazing tapers pale;
And thus, O soul resplendent, evermore prevailing,
Thy phantom is the peer of the far sun unfailing.

The Wine of Lovers



Space dawns today resplendently!
With rein nor spur, nor bridle, we
Will part upon the soaring wine
For faery skies and skies divine.

Like tortured angels, who endure
Some unrelenting calenture,
By flaming far mirages drawn
Through azure crystal of the dawn,

And softly, gently balancing
On whirlwinds of the conscious air
With indolent, delirious wing,

My sister, side by side we fare,
In truceless flight for ever blown,
To find the heaven my dreams have known.

Obsession



Great woods, you frighten me like some cathedral's gloom!
You howl as howls an organ; through the undying dole
And long death-rattles in my heart's accursed room,
Responding echoes of your De Profundis roll.

I hate you, Ocean! all your rampant rage and vain
Tumult resounds within my soul; the laughter drear
Of a vanquished man, with insults filled and sobs of pain,
This ever in the sea's enormous laugh I hear.

How you would pleasure me, O Night! without the stars,
Whose wan or flameful splendor speaks a language known:
For I seek the null, the bare, the tenebrous alone.

But, dwelling past the lifted curtains and drawn bars
Of darkness, on my ken in teeming myriads rise
The vanished Beings with vigilant familiar eyes.

Alchemy of Sorrow



One with his fervor shall inform
The world, and one with all his sorrow:
One sees a glad, unsetting morrow,
One hears the whisper of the worm.

Hermes unknown, whose hand assists
My toil, and fills my dreams with fear,
Through thee I am the mournful peer
Of Midas, first of alchemists.

Fine gold to iron corruptible
I turn, and paradise to hell;
In winding-sheets of cloud and levin
A dear cadaver I descry;
And build upon the shores of heaven
Towering proud sarcophagi

Sympathetic Horror



“From this bizarre and livid sky,
Tormented like your doom and mine,
On your void spirit passing by,
What thoughts descend, O libertine ?”

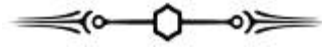
— Athirst for mortal things unsung
In shadowy realms of lone surmise,
I will not whine like Ovid, flung
From out the Latin paradise.

Skies torn like strands of ocean-streams,
In you is mirrored all my pride!
Your slow, enormous clouds abide

The dolent hearses of my dreams;
Your glimmers mock with fluctuant lights
The hell wherein my heart delights.

The Irremediable

I



An Entity, an Eidolon,
Fallen from out some azure clime
Into a Styx of lead and slime
Nor star nor sun has looked upon;

A wandering angel indiscreet
Lost in the love of things difform,
Who down abysmal dreams of harm
Falls heating as great swimmers beat,

And fights in mortal anguish stark
Some eddy of a demon sea
That sings and shouts deliriously
And dances in the whirling dark;

A hapless man, bewitched, bewrayed,
Whose futile gropings fain would find,
In reptile-swarmed darkness blind,
The lost light and the key mislaid;

A lost soul without lamp descending,
To whom the gulf-arisen smell
Betrays a dank, profounder hell
And railless fall of stars unending

Where slimy monsters ward the way,
Whose eyes of phosphor, luminous, large,
Make darker still the nighted marge.
Burning in hulks obscure for aye;

A vessel at the frozen pole
As in a trap of crystal caught,
And searching how her keel was brought
Thereto by fatal strait and shoal: —

Clear emblems, perfect similes
Of an irremediable doom,
That prove how well the Devil's loom
Can weave our somber destinies!

II

Self-mirrored, in close colloquy,
The heart its image sees in sooth:
The dark and lucid well of Truth
Where a star trembles lividly,

Flambeau of grace from sullen hells,
Pharos ironic and infernal,
Sole glory, solacement eternal —
A Conscience still in Evil dwells.

The Dark Chateau and Other Poems (1951)



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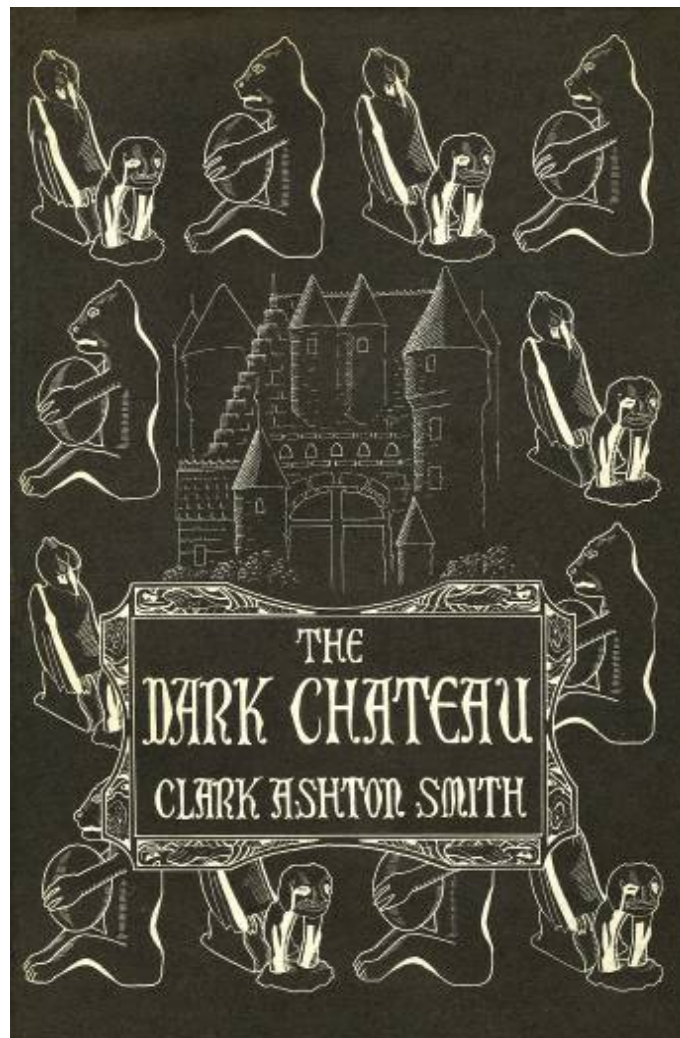
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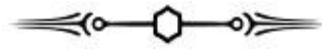
Luna Aeternalis

Ye Shall Return



The first edition

Amithaine



Who has seen the towers of Amithaine
Swan-throated rising from the main
Whose tides to some remoter moon
Flow in a fadeless afternoon?...
Who has seen the towers of Amithaine
Shall sleep, and dream of them again.

On falcon banners never furled,
Beyond the marches of the world,
They blazon forth the heraldries
Of dream-established sovereignties
Whose princes wage immortal wars
For beauty with the bale-red stars.

Amid the courts of Amithaine
The broken iris rears again
Restored from gardens youth has known;
And strains from ruinous viols flown
The legends tell in Amithaine
Of her that is its chatelaine.

Dreamer, beware! in her wild eyes
Full many a sunken sunset lies,
And gazing, you shall find perchance
The fallen kingdoms of romance,

And past the bourns of north and south
Follow the roses of her mouth.

For trumpets blare in Amithaine
For paladins that once again
Ride forth to ghostly, glamorous wars
Against the doom-preparing stars.
Dreamer, awake!... but I remain
To ride with them in Amithaine.

Seeker



In valleys where the lotos falls
And rots by lily-stifled streams,
A sleeper, dreaming of the sea,
Shall rise, and leave the halcyon lawns,

And follow fainting trails alone
Into the waste that has no well,
Of fare on some fantasmal quest
To climes beyond the boreal snow.

For, sated with the lotos-fruit,
He craves again the vanishing brine,
The sunken ships, the siren isles,
The maelstroms haunted by the mew.

Amid chimera and mirage
He plucks the acrid outland pome
And mordent herbs that make him whole,
And trails the meteor and the star

To leave this vulture-burnished bones
In lands of knightlier sleep than they
Shall haply share whose bones are laid
Where now the lotos-blossoms blow.

The Dark Chateau



The mysteries of your former dust,
Your lives declined from solar light —
These would you know, or these surmise?
Beneath a swathed and mummied sun,
Descend where dayless dials rust,
Where the, void hourglass fills with night;
And seeing with still-living eyes
Dim Acherontic rivers run,

Follow where shrouded barges float
And fall, in regions of the dead,
Into the sable-foaming depths.
Then over ghostland mountains go
To find, beyond a bridgeless moat,
What stairs with shadow carpeted
Crumble behind the climber's steps
In some foreknown forlorn chateau.

Where exile ghosts of gales that blew
At eve from vintages antique
Still stir the blurring tapestries,
And empty armor guards the rooms
By rotting portraits that were you,
Pass on. From airless cupboards bleak
Startle memorial spiceries
And plagues adrowse in attared glooms.

By oriels charged with stifled stains,
With night-blent purples, gules embrowned,
And spring's lost verdure, graver now
Than cypress at the set of day,
Pause, and look forth: no ghost remains
Save you to gaze on that dim ground
Where once the budding almond-bough
Waved, and the oleander-spray.

Hoar silence is the seneschal
Of court and keep, of niche and coigne.
With drumless ear no lute annoys,
Nor clang from farring jambarts drawn,
Death, with dlulled arrasses for pall,
Waits whitely there; and none will join
Your quest, nor ever any voice
Speak from the chambered epochs gone:

Till from the vaults with shadows brimmed
Shall come a cowled lampadephore,
holding his lamp, by no breath blown,
To mirrors moony-clear and still
Where never living face is limned,
But wan reflections fixed of yore —
Long-mouldered shapes that were your own —
Graven in glass, unchanged and chill.

Lamia



Out of her desert lair the lamia came,
A lovely serpent shaped as women are.
Meeting me there, she hailed me by the name

Belovèd lips had used in days afar;
And when the lamia sang, it seemed I heard
The voice of love in some old avatar.

Her lethal beauty like a philtre stirred
Through all my blood and filled my heart with light:
I wedded her with ardor undeterred

By the strange mottlings of her body white,
By the things that crept across us in her den
And the dead who lay beside us through the night.

Colder her flesh than the serpents of the fen,
Yet on her breast I lost mine ancient woe
And found the joy forbid to living men.

But, ah, it was a thousand years ago
I took the lovely lamia for bride...
And nevermore shall they that meet me know

It is a thousand years since I have died.

Pour Chercher Du Nouveau



Call up the lordly daemon that in Cimmeria dwells
Amid the vaults untrodden, long-sealed with lethal spells,
Amid the untouched waters of Lemur-warded wells.

Call up the wiser genius who knows and understands
The lore of night and limbo, who finds in tomb-dark lands
The pearls and shells and wreckage that strew the dawnless strands —

Remnants of elder cargoes, lost, enigmatic spars
From seas without horizon, washing occulted stars,
From shadow-sunken cycles of vaster calendars.

Call up the vagrant daemon, whose vans have haply strayed
Through subterranean heavens by dead Anubis bayed,
Who has seen abysmal evil, aloof and undismayed;

Beholding fouler phantoms no necromancer wakes,
Reptilian bulks that cumber the thick putrescent lakes,
And pterodactyls brooding their nests in charnel brakes;

Hearing the unspent anger of troglodyte and Goth,
The rote of gods abolished, the moan of Ashtaroth,
The hunger and the fury of famished Behemoth.

Call up the sapient daemon, whose eyes have haply read
The cipher-graven portals in planets of the dead,
Who knows the dark apastrons of stars for ever sped;

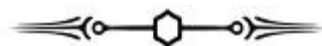
Who has seen the lost eidola hewn from no earthly stone,
The untrusting magic mirrors, in chambers chill and lone,
That hold supernal faces from heavens overthrown;

Who has heard the vatic voices of witch-wrought teraphim,
The wailing fires of Moloch, the flames that swirl and swim
Around the blood-black altars of ravening Baalim;

Who has heard the sands of ocean, far-sifted on the beach,
Repeating crystal echoes of some sidereal speech;
Who has heard the atoms telling their legend each to each.

Call up the errant daemon, the pilgrim of strange lands,
And he will come, arising from shadow-tided strands,
With gifts of bale and beauty and wonder in his hands.

O Golden-Tongued Romance



We found, we knew it dimly
Within a dead life grimly
By guarding time inurned —
A glamour far and olden,
A fulgor night-enfolden,
A flame that in long-darkling Eden burned.

Though hardly then we claimed it,
We yet adored and named it
With a name forgotten now —
A faery word and dawn-like,
A word of gramarie, gone like
An opal bird from off a purple bough...

Ah! vain the lamp reluming
The unhaunted vault inhuming
The cold Canopic jar,
And vain the charm recovered
From out the daemon-hovered,
Worm-travelled page of pentacled grimoire.

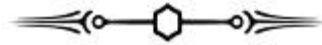
And yet the thing we yearned for,
The thing that we returned for
From tomb and catacomb,
It may not wholly dwindle

While moon or meteor kindle
A phantom beacon on the ebon foam.

Through ghoul-watched wood unthridden,
By goblin mere and midden,
No ivory horn will blow,
No gold lamp lighten gloom-ward,
But we will carry doom-ward
The broken beauty caught from long ago:

An echo half evading
The ear, remotely fading
From a far-vibrant lyre.
A long-plucked flower blooming
In the dry urn, a fuming
Myrrh-fragrant ember in a darkened pyre.

Averoigne



In Averoigne the enchantress weaves
Weird spells that call a changeling sun,
Or hale the moon of Hecate
Down to the ivy-hooded towers.
At evening, from her nightshade bowers,
The bidden vipers creep, to be
The envoys of her malison;
And philtres drained from tomb-fat leaves
Drip through her silver sieves.

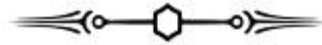
In Averoigne swart phantoms flown
From pestilent moat and stagnant lake
Glide through the garish festival
In torch-lit cities far from time.
Whether for death or birth, the chime
Of changeless bells equivocal
Clangs forth, while carven satyrs make
With mouths of sullen, sombre stone
Unending silent moan.

In Averoigne abides the mage.
So deep the silence of his cell,
Life hears the termless monarchies
That walk with thunder-echoing shoon

In iron castles past the moon —
Fast-moated with eternities;
And hears the shrewish laughters swell
Of Norns that plot the impested age
And wars that suns shall wage.

In Averroigne the lamia sings
To lyres restored from tombs antique,
And lets her coiling tresses fall
Before a necromantic glass.
She sees her vein-drawn lovers pass,
Faintly they cry to her, and all
The bale they find, the bliss they seek,
Is echoed in the tarnished strings
That tell archaic things.

Zothique



He who has trod the shadows of Zothique
And looked upon the coal-red sun oblique,
Henceforth returns to no anterior land,
But haunts a later coast
Where cities crumble in the black sea-sand
And dead gods drink the brine.

He who has known the gardens of Zothique
Were bleed the fruits torn by the simorgh's beak,
Savors no fruit of greener hemispheres:
In arbors uttermost,
In sunset cycles of the sombering years,
He sips an amaranth wine.

He who has loved the wild girls of Zothique
Shall not come back a gentler love to seek,
Nor know the vampire's from the lover's kiss:
For him the scarlet ghost
Of Lilith from time's last necropolis
Rears amorous and malign.

He who has sailed in galleys of Zothique
And seen the looming of strange spire and peak,
Must face again the sorcerer-sent typhoon,

And take the steerer's post
On far-poured oceans by the shifted moon
Or the re-shapen Sign.

The Stylite



Upon his pillar stands upright
The rigid anchoret: his pose,
Over the desert, toward the sky,
Prolongs the rectitude of stone,
The rising and unbroken line.

Emmets and men go by beneath.
The veering vultures fan his brow:
He sees them not: his sanctity
Enfolds him like the fuming cloud
A thousand thuribles might yield.

At evening pass in pompous file
The larvae sent by Satanas.
To mock him, on a pagan height
The ram pant sagittary stands,
Stallion of maenads half-equine;

And pulsing soft horizons fall
And swell with forms the heathen shun —
Dark sisters of the Ashtaroth
That crawl from undescended gulfs
Or slither over sliding scaurs.

With kelpy tresses wreathed with foam,
Voluptuous cold Nereides

Upon the surging desert float;
And Cypris, as from out the sea,
Rises reborn with veil nor zone.

Behind dissolving peristyles
Lithe sphinxes crouch and rear in rut;
And mincing from Gomorrah's night,
Vague-membered gods androgynous
Invert an ithyphallic sign.

The reeking shames of Sheol glow
And writhe before him... Still upright
The saint exalts the columned stone
With folden arms and changeless eyes —
In chastity long ankylosed.

Dominium in Excelsis



Exalt thyself: be more than man,
Be saint or be magician,
And where the burning Sword awaits
Defy the old seraphic ban.

Thy will, that climbs from dark estates,
Shall divinize the godless fates,
This fiery ecstasy of dream
Melt down the grim, forbidden gates

That open into spheres extreme
Beyond the starry-bubbled stream —
Beyond Capella, past Altair —
Where amaranthine gardens gleam.

Thy feet shall tread the Scorpion's lair,
Thy hands shall catch the comet's hair;
Or over Endor thou shalt ride
Unfrighted on the tamed Nightmare.

And thence go down where ghosts have died
And famished ghouls and vampires glide;
Or tarry in years behind the tomb;
Or in the multiple futures bide.

Thou shalt respire the flame and fume
Of Beltis' altars drowned in gloom

Under her sharded fanes; or share
The fabled Atlantean doom,

And rise unharmed to light and air
Out of old death, once more to death
With antinomian deed and thought
The planet of thy slain despair —

Till stones and atoms, shadow-wrought,
Dissolving shall return to naught,
Or into fairer shapes be brought.

Moly



Who are ye that always wander
Up and down and here and yonder?

— We are they that ever seek,
Over fen and fell and peak,
Down the desert-straitened creek,
Through dank forests darkening wholly
Tarns remote and melancholy,
For the flower known as moly,
Flower that wards the flesh and heart
From beguileful Circe's art.

Seek no more! seek no more!
Not on mountain, moor or shore,
Not by noon, nor under moon,
Blows the plant of magic boon,
Not with eyes shall any find it
Nor with fingers pluck and wind it:
From the dust of limbs and heart
Shall the roots of moly start,
Over thy forgetful grave
Shall the flower of moly wave.

Two Myths And A Fable



Whither go ye, haughty warriors,
with coats of mail effulgent like the moon?
— We sally forth to slay the basilisk
in some deep gulf his eyes alone illumine.

Whither go ye, valiant mariners,
in your vessel colored like the leaves of autumn?
— We sail to seek some bright and verdant shore,
the last asylum of the unicorns.

Whither go ye, nameless wizards,
with robes out reddening the sunset gleam?
— We fare to find the jars of Solomon
and liberate the imprisoned genii.

Eros of Ebony



Sculptor of demons and of goddesses,
I chisel also an eidolon of love
in ebony, adorning him with black roses
that bear the thorns of pain and sorrow.

His mouth and brows, capricious,
mingle their honey with a great bitterness;
upon his shoulder, with tightening talons,
there perches a hard-eyed hawk.

Selling all my ancient idols,
I worship the new god: before his altar
I bring the mythic fruits of distant lands
and cast the loot of ocean-se pulchres.

The god is blind... and my oblations
have vainly hued his ebon heels with blood.

Shapes in the Sunset



Daylong was my slumber. At the sunset,
Wakening, I beheld the clouds, a hundred
Shapes of antic gods and beasts of wonder
Gathered on the horizon.

Vulcan, with his forge behind him, towered,
Greaved with aureate fire, against the boundless
Concave west; and whirling Scylla spouted
Purple spray on Triton.

There, with gaping mouth, the Mantichora
Showed his teeth and uttered silent roarings;
Light and silky as thistle-down, the Astomians
Came from lands of marvel,

Wafted on their ether; and the headless
People followed after them, the Blemmyes,
Searing on humped shoulders through the heavens
Their enormous fardels.

There, across dismembered Titans crawling,
Python rolled his volumes; there the Gorgon,
Eyed with blinding gold, through rack amorphous
Trailed her sinuous ringlets.

There, with skyward soles, with head inverted,
Hung the Sciapod, torn from his earthy

Plot remote; and swam the cod-tailed Mermaid,
From the surges rivers.

While the sunset, deepening and rubious,
Limned the bestiary shapes in lurid
Salamandrine hues, and robed with murex
Gods from myths forgotten,

I, the watcher, cried: "O clouds of wonder,
Fables, carry me where an age-long sunset
Arches your lost Thule, by no sullen
Earth-born shadows blotted!"

Not Theirs the Cypress-Arch



Dream not the dead will wait,
Slow-crumbling in the allotted ground,
Nor rise except to some sonorous trump
And scaring splendors of the doomsday sun:
They rise, they gather about us now,
Crowding the quiet day.

To us, entombed in time,
Asleep within a vaster vault,
They use a speech we seem not to have known,
Yet guide us like sleep-walkers to and fro —
By those forgotten voices drawn
With secret tacit guile.

Not theirs the cypress-arch,
The sexton's haunt, the hallowed stones,
The charnel morris stilled by chanticleer:
Dark demons, through the forum and the street
They move, and we, their fleshly ghosts,
Like driven demoniacs are.

Don Quixote on Market Street



Riding on Rosinante where the cars
With dismal unremitting clangors pass,
And people move like curbless energumens
Rowelled by fiends of fury back and forth,
Behold! Quixote comes, in battered mail,
Armgaunt, with eyes of some keen haggard hawk
Far from his eyrie. Gazing right and left,
Over his face a lightning of disdain
Flushes, and limns the hollowness of cheeks
Bronzed by the suns of battle; and his hand
Tightens beneath its gauntlet on the lance
As if some foe had challenged him, or sight
Of unredressed wrong provoked his ire....

Brave spectre, what chimera shares thy saddle,
Pointing thee to this place? Thy tale is told,
The high, proud legend of all causes lost —
A quenchless torch emblazoning black ages.
Go hence, deluded paladin: there is
No honor here, nor glory, to be won.
Knight of La Mancha, turn thee to the past,
Amid its purple marches ride for aye,
Nor tilt with thunder-driven iron mills
That shall grind on to silence. Chivalry
Has flown to stars unsooted by the fumes

That have befouled these heavens, and romance
Departing, will unfurl her oriflammes
On towers unbuilt in an age to be.
Waste not thy knightliness in wars unworthy,
For time and his alastors shall destroy
Full soon, and bring to stuffless, cloudy ruin
All things that fret thy spirit, riding down
This pass with pandemonian walls, this Hinnom
Where Moloch and where Mammon herd the doomed.

Malediction



While the black perennial snows
Piled about the pole of night
Swell the fount whence Lethe flows;

While the worm, apart from light,
Eats the page where magians pored;
While the kraken, blind and white,

Guards the greening books abhorred
Where the evil oghams rust —
In accurst Atlantis stored;

While beneath the seal of dust
Dead mouths mutter not in sleep
To betray oblivion's trust;

While the dusky planets keep,
Past the outlands of the sun,
Circuits of a sunless deep,

Never shall the spell be done
And the curse be lifted never
That shall find and leave you one

With forgotten things for ever.

Hellenic Sequel



Skies of verd-antique
Domed the murex-tinted peak
In the dreamland where I found
Flowering grape that clasped and crowned
One fluted column still unbroken,
Lovely, old and Greek.

II

Near the column,
In the stream that flowed
From the sunset mountain-spring,
I heard the lonely naiad sing,
Praising the weedy bowers of her abode.
Sweeter than silence was her song,
Sweeter than sleep her answer
When I spoke:
Quickly then her cold arms wound me
In the water, and they drowned me
Ere I woke.

The Cypress



If passing sometime
beside my grave
thy love would awaken
the soul once mine,
thou wilt see a bird
on a cypress perched:
then speak with the bird,
which is my soul.

If thou callest my name,
if thou summonest me,
softly repeating
that love is for aye,
thou wilt hear the wind
in the cypress blowing:
then speak with the wind,
which is my soul.

But if being even now
the thrall of another
thou troublest and floutest
my ultimate slumber,
take care, O unkindest,
approach not the cypress,
flee from its shadow
which is my soul.

Flee from the bird,
whatever its plumage,
flee from the wind,
whatever its rune.

Ah!... vain is thy flight,
wheresoever thou goest
there follows the shadow
cast by the cypress.

The Old Water-Wheel



Often, on homeward ways, I come
To a deserted orchard, old and lone,
Unplowed, untrod, with wilding grasses grown
Through rows of pear and plum.

There, in a never-ceasing round,
In the slow stream, by noon, by night, by dawn,
An ancient, hidden water-wheel turns on
With a sad, reiterant sound.

Most eerily it comes and dies,
And comes again, when on the horizon's breast
The ruby of Antares seems to rest,
Fallen from star-fraught skies:

A dolent, drear, complaining note
Whose all-monotonous cadence haunts the air
Like the recurrent moan of a despair
Some heart has learned by rote.

Heavy, and ill to hear for one
Within whose breast, today, tonight, tomorrow,
Like the slow wheel, an ancient, darkling sorrow
Turns, and is never done.

Calenture



Rathe summer had sere'd the grass in which he lay
Under the little shade
The live-oak made,
While things remembered and foregone,
Loves from the drouth of other summers drawn,
Like rootless windlestrae
Went past him on
The hot and lucid flowing of the day.
The wine-flask at his side
Shown empty: he had spilled
The last drops for oblation on the dried
Pale rootlets dead with May
Of the small-seeded oats no man had tilled.
He thought: their death is clean,
This tawny change that overtakes the green
And makes the unnumbered fragile skeletons
Yet yields no mortal fetor to the suns.
Their death is clean...but ours
Is not the death of grasses and of flowers...

He thought: they die and live and die again
With little travail, none of little pain:
But love, though brief as these,
With endless agonies
Of bitter and relucting breath,

Accepts, refuses, and receives its death...
And here it was,
On grass that bore the seed of the same grass
On which I now recline,
That my mouth drank the wine
Of dregless love and beauty from the cup
Of pagan flesh in fulness offered up.
To him that keeps, forlorn,
From morn to vacant morn
The vigil of the seasons, shall there come
Ever again the timeless, tall delirium?

In the afternoon with burning silence filled,
Cicada-like, a fever sang and shrilled,
Hurrying anew his passion-wearied blood
Through veins oppressed by heat and hebetude.
Indifferently he watched the westering day
Like spreading fire consume
The thin last shrunken shade in which he lay.
He closed his dazzled eyes; in the red gloom
Behind the sun-confronting lids he saw
A faceless and colossal woman loom:
One moment in his eyes,
Ere the dislimning vision could withdraw,
The breasts were large and dim as daylight moons,
The hips, on scarlet skies,
Glimmered with arch of evening semilunes,
The shadowy shell curved between vast thighs.

Soliloquy in An Ebon tower



The poet speaks, addressing a framed picture of
Baudelaire upon a bookcase:

The lamp burns stilly in the standing air,
As in some ventless caveen. Through wide windows
The midnight brings a silence from the stars,
And perfumes that the planet dreams in sleep.
The hounds have ceased to bay; and the cicadas
To play their goblin harps. The owl that whilom
Hooted his famine to a full-chapped moon,
Has pounced upon his gopher, or has gone
To fresher woods behind a farther hill;
And Hecate has grounded all the witches
For some glade-hidden Sabbat.

In my room
The quick, malign, relentless clock ticks on,
Firm as a demon's undecaying pulse,
Or creak of Charon's oar locks as he plies
Between the shadow-crowded shores. Evoked
Within the vaults of my funereal brain,
Voices awaken, sibilant and restless-
Tongues of the viper's charnel-fostered brood,
Half-grown, amid the shreds of winding sheets
And crumbling wicker of old bones. They sing,
Those little voices, all the poisonous,

Importunate melodies you too have heard,
O Baudelaire, in midnights when the moon
Sank, followed by some cloudy hearse of dreams.
Into the skyless nadir of despond.
Black-flickering, cloven tongues! Though we distill
Quintessences of hemlock or nepenthe,
We cannot slay the small, the subtle serpents.
Whose mother is the Iamia Melancholy
That feeds upon our breath and sucks our veins,
Stifling us with her velvet volumes.

Now

My thoughts pursue the sandal and sad myrrh
Sighed by the shouds of all hesternal sorrows.
Busied with old regrets, they carry on
Such commerce as the burrowing necrophores
Conduct from grave to grave; or pause to mumble
Snatches of ancient amorous elegies,
Deploring still some splendid, stately love-
Gone like the pomps of void Ecbatana-
That only lives in epodes, but will rise
To ghost the goldless morrows, clothed about
With hues of suns declining and decayed,
And crowned with ruinous autumn.

Other thoughts

Exhume the withered wind-shards of ideals
Brittle and light as perished moths, or bring
To sight the mummied of blair mischance,

By dismal eves and moons disastrous flying,
Their vans have darkened. On beloved deaths
I muse, and through my twice-wept tears re-gather
The threads that Clotho and Lachesis have spun
And Atropos has cut; and see the bleak
Sinister gleaming of the steely shears
Behind the riven arrasses of time.

What weapon can we arm us with? What bulwark
Build against grief and time? What moat renewed
With waters mortal as those the shroud Gomorrah,
Will the sea-going termite never ferry
To gnaw the ebon tower, the ebon ark
Holding the Muses' covenant? Splendor-brimmed,
What grail of God or Satan will suffice
For all the breadless days, the unguerdoned labors?

Yet, for a toll so light, by Song transported,
To sail beyond Elysium and Thelem,
And see, from oblivion looming, balmier shores
Of fables infinite! To light our dreams
At rose Aldebaran or sky-huge Antares,
Then quench their heat, or temper Damascus thought
In cold aphelions and apastrons far!
To pace the sun's Typhoean ramparts vast!
To couch on Saturn's outmost ring, or roll
With Pluto through his orb of eventide
Whose Hesper is the dwindled sun! To flaunt
Before the blind in immarcesible purple

Won from the murex of Uranian seas,
And fire-plucked vermeil of Vulcan, worn against
These aguish mists and wintry shadows! Thus
We triumph; thus the laurel overtops
The upas and the yew; and we decline
No toil, no dolor of our votive doom.

High-housed within the Alchemic Citadel,
We are served by Azoth and by Alkahest.
Out of the gleamless mire and sand we make
Pactolian metal. Fumed from our alembics,
The world dissolves like vapors opium-wrought,
Or drips, condensed, to philtres and to venorns
That Circe nor Simaetha dreamed. We built,
Daedalus-like, a labyrinth of words
Wherein our thoughts are twi-shaped Minotaurs
The ages shall not slay. Our ironies,
Like marbled adders creeping on through time,
Shall fang the brains of poets yet to be.
Our nacred moons and corposants of beauty
Shall float on ever-mootful lands retained
By Lar and Lemur; where Chimera flies,
And still the Sphinx unanswerably rules;
Where the red phantoms we have loosed from Dis
Still haunt the thickets and the cities: where
Our phosphor lamps may serve as well as any
Along the rutted way to Charon's wharf.

Sinbad, It Was Not Well to Brag



Sinbad, the Barnacle Bill of Araby,
Carried upon his back the Old Man of the Sea,
Over crag, down ravine,
Round and round in a cane-brake green,
Tramp, tramp,
Under the coconuts, through the swamp,
Between the camphors, into the swale
Where the upas dropped its blooms of bale —
Tangling with the tough rattans,
Staggering under the hammers of noon
Over the sands
Of a steamy lagoon
A-crawl with crabs and bêche-de-mer —
Lurching through the gamboge glare
Of sunset into the damaskeened
Twilight where the tree-ferns leaned,
Chasing a saffron-bellied moon
That swayed like a drunken temple-girl
On beaches paved with coral and pearl —
Bemoaning his fate
Like the sad estate
Of a Baghdad porter, a Caliph's flunky —
Slipping on rotted mangosteens,
Tripping on jades and tourmalines,
Sliding on dung of tapir and monkey,

Startling the bug-eyed lemur, sending
The flying-fox to a farther landing,
Nights, days,
Half-blind in a clotted haze,
Hay-foot, straw-foot,
All in an Indonesian Tophet: —
Till, seeing the vines that ran
Over rock and tree he contrived a plan
More clever than rash,
And he made in a mighty calabash
From the island-grapes a vintage new
With bubbles like rubies clustering thick
And all the strength of an ostrich-kick;
And the old man sipped the sailor's brew
And swore by Allah's vicar
He had never tasted a better liquor,
Then took the calabash in his talons
And swigged the pints and swilled the gallons
Till even the thickest lees were downed,
And the grip of his arms and legs grew slack
On Sinbad's back,
And he slid at last to the jungle-ground,
Happy as a hinny
In the clover of June,
Soused like a sultan, full as any
Tick that drops from a fat baboon...

This was the story that Sinbad
Told to astonish Hinbad:

The story was new,
Whether fantastic or true.

But, granting that your narration
Was free from extravagation,
Sinbad, it was not well to brag
At the sunset end of your ocean-road:
For others have carried a heavier load
On aching shoulders a-sag —
A load that they could not lose.

My incubus is the classic hag
Yclept the Muse.

Sonnet for the Psychoanalysts



When sleep dissolved that super-Freudian dream
where featherless harpies mated while they fed,
I could not find my body: but a thread
of blood on fabled stairs, through mist and steam,
led to a hall of legend. There, in the gleam
of Kubla's lamps, my table-seated head
in gem-bright goblets lazuline and red
saw essences Falernian fall and cream,
self-poured, with cans of seething beer. Beyond,
in balconies that craned on vacant skies,
one booted leg went striding sentry-wise.
It was my own. It guarded with strict care
my heart, a sanguine, ice-girt diamond
imprisoned in some crystal frigidaire.

Surrealist Sonnet



The lyrebird giblets in the frying-pan
cheep crisply to the sibilant blue gas.
A Congo mouth gulps a blonde demitasse,
then spews on the flowered rug from Ispahan.
Rome's red flamingo feathers wave their fan:
while stilt-legged crow and stomach sac alas
march down beneath aforetime's blear morass
bannered with mildewed naperies of man.

But brandished over stale antiquities
still rise the verdant hones of gluttonies
flying the parchments of new horoscopes.
The sage arachnidan from Regulus
amid its souvenirs on raddled ropes
will haply hang some dried esophagus.

The Twilight of the Gods



All the satyrs have been dehorned,
And wappened are Mohammed's houris;
Pluto lies supremely corned
Amid the snakeless Furies.

Every mermaiden I have seen
Was sunning her hams in a bathing-suit,
Melpomene is on the screen,
Pan is tootling a night-club flute.

The jinnees all are in the jug
(I mean the kind with a seal and Stopper)
The famous flying Arabian rug
Has somewhere come a cropper.

Great Hercules by mail doth sell
Lessons for building muscles rightly...
But the witch of Endor is doing well
With seances given nightly.

The Golden Fleece, a trifle crummy,
Hangs in a shop with three gold spheres;
Apollo is a dry-goods dummy,
Atropos wields a sempstress' shears.

Adonis runs a bill at the tailor's,
Diana hunts the genus homo,

The Cyprian goddess is chiseling sailors
In a dive with a Bouguereau chromo.

Old Pegasus, that spavined nag,
Is out to grass with the cows and hinnies,
While Bacchus has gone on another jag
At Angelo's or Dinny's.

The Poet Talks with the Biographers



O ghouls of fetid and funereal midnights,
Say, what do you uncover in your sad labors?
— We have disinterred the Empusa of thy fears
And the frightful Gorgon with her livid eyeballs
In our mournful labors.

O diggers all so diligent, O sapient ghouls,
What have you found in your prodigious toils?
— We have exhumed with all their antique evils
Thy loves, with features gutted by the worms,
In our enormous toils.

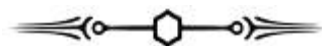
Grimed openers of pyramid and ossuary,
What revealed ye yesterday at crimson evening?
— We have dug up the black and ashen soil
To anatomize the shroudless nymph
Who was laid to sleep at evening.

Ghouls, what would ye do, tonight, for your pleasure,
Within these low, lugubrious and gaping tombs?
— We come to disenswathe the living dead —
The never-gelded fauns of thine old vices —
Within these gaping tombs.

Wherefore in such efforts, O Chaldean ghouls,
Whiten ye the earth with the salt of your sweat?

— Therein we find ineffable pleasures always:
Odors of the ripe dead, and ancient spices,
Embalsam our sweat.

Desert Dweller



There is no room in any town (he said)
To house the towering hugeness of my dream.
It straitens me to sleep in any bed

Whose foot is nearer than the night's extreme.
There is too much of solitude in crowds
For one who has been where constellations teem,

Where boulders meet with boulders, and the clouds
And hills convene; who has talked at evening
With mountains clad in many-colored shrouds.

Men pity me for the scant gold I bring:
Ungessed within my heart the solar glare
On monstrous gems that lit my journeying.

They deem the desert flowerless and bare,
Who have not seen above their heads unfold
The vast, inverted lotus of blue air;

Nor know what Flanging Gardens I behold
With half-shut eyes between the earth and moon
In topless iridescent tiers unrolled.

For them, the planted fields, their veriest boon;
For me, the verdure of inviolate grass
In far mirages vanishing at noon.

For them, the mellowed strings, the strident brass,
The cry of love, the clangor of great horns,
The thunder-burdened ways where thousands pass.

For me, the silence welling from dark urns,
From fountains past the utmost world and son...
To overflow some day the desert bourns ...

And take the sounding cities one by one.

Hesperian Fall



The season brings but little gold,
And only rusty gules and sanguines dull
To these rude hills with darkling lava cored
And with thick, sombre rocks embossed
That yield small pasture to the mordant sun;
And leaves of toneless brown and fawn
Cluster the glaucous foliage of blue-oaks
Amid the fallow grasses leonine;
And the live-oaks' grave and winter-waiting green
And the dim greys and dusky verdures of the pines
Seem to turn darker with October's heat.
In lowland and ravine
By dwindled nil and narrowed river, willow
And poplar and wild grape
Will burn to purer yellows,
To ruddier or more empurpled stains;
And in the rows of fruit-plucked orchard trees
Exotic pomp, deciduous splendor royal-hued
Of other climes and orient autumns flame:
But here the desiccate and sun-struck fells
No similar gauds assume.

Watching the tardy portents of slow change
Prolonged unnotably through changeless days,
I walk in solitude

Where memories return
That die not with a single season's leaves
But still delay the blind nepenthean doom,
And gather stranger hues
Than these that clothe the tree
Or fold the autumnal earth.
Love walks with me, a spectre beautiful
With fallen seasons and with suns that were,
And on the ground our linked shadows run
Together, and her heavy hair is blown,
The invisible sending of a witch's web,
On winds from off the sea
Whose autumn shore we followed long ago;
And ecstasy and teen
Wild as the spray of combers reaching us
On crags that held the perilous paths of love,
Return to haunt these uplands calm and sere;
And wafts of cypress-balsam, keen and sweet,
From the sped years blow over me,
And Lobos rises like a granite ghost
To crown the sealess wold.

Thus conscious and remembering,
I move across a land
That seems oblivion's self —
A land whose primal languors drowse the will,
Whose sleepy light and dim-horized air
Proffer the earth's antique forgetfulness.
But for awhile I spurn

The peace that comes to all or rathe or late,
And clasp the cherished pain
As one with face amid thorned blossoms pressed
Who finds them fragranter
Than those that bear no thorn.
Now, where the stones lie still
And taciturn and secret and withdrawn
In that dark entity we cannot share,
And where the pines their level branches swing
Lightly in gusts that rise and pass,
But stir not ever from their rooted stance,
I hear a voice that sings
Some old-world measure magical and clear,
Or catch the glimmer of a girl's white feet
Moving in moonlit saraband.
O voice none other hears, that sings for me!
Now must I muse on passions that unfold
Slow as the lichen grows,
Or swiftly as the fungus of the night;
And think on how
The many have withered but the one abides...

The shadow of a cloud
Falls on the gnarled and boulder-buttressed oak
Beneath whose boughs I pause,
Noting the mistletoe
Already pearled with wintry berries white
'Mid leaves of mottled bronze and feuillemort.
Haply the days draw nigh

When dark-toothed wind and tempest will assail
Such spare, sad splendor as these hills put on,
And wildly strew
Green leaves and sere together to that doom
Which waits for all.
Meanwhile the southward-drooping sun shines warm
On grasses pale and foliages that fade
And on the fadeless lichen of the stone;
And still, O season of Circean dreams
Preferred from long ago,
I find a music far and sorcerous
Like one who hears the dryad singing from her tree;
And still, beneath this latter sun,
Love is the freshness of your shadows, love
The flame that in your distant azure sleeps.

Not Altogether Sleep



Blithe love, what dubious ponderings bemuse
Thy lover's mind!... In me thy memories are
As attar in some alabaster jar...

Wholly must I the rose-drawn essence lose
Upon unbalmed oblivion, and diffuse
Its odor on the dust? And shall no star
Of ours illumine that ebon calendar
I keep beneath the taproots of the yews?

Or shall, in some ineffable permanence,
The senses merge into one only sense
Holding thine image evermore apart
From suns expired arid cycles yet to come —
Where time shall have none other pendulum
Than the remembered pulsings of thy heart?

Some Blind Eidolon



Longer ago than Eden's oldest morn,
Ere beast or man was born,
I chose for mine
The love whereto some ancient evil clings,
With sombre spectra barring still the wings
That wear the irised flame of suns divine —
The love whereto some ancient evil clings.

Down all the planet-paven ways of time,
Lengthening from the prime
A shadow falls —
A thing that climbs the pharos-guarded gates,
Or by the wizard's dying brazier waits,
Or lairs amid the many tapered halls —
A thing that climbs the pharos-guarded gates.

Have we not known, O witch, O queen, O maid,
The stain that creeps unstayed
In love's alloy?
The fretful moth that frays the bed of lust?
The wingless and unwearable disgust
That overtakes the philtre-goaded joy —
The fretful moth that frays the bed of lust?

Though proud as gardened Babylon our bliss,
Mortal corruption is

The seed self-sown
Amid the rampant flowers and the founts...
The laughter of some blind eidolon mounts
Where the self-deluded mourner sobs alone
Amid the ruined flowers and the founts.

Dark loves of all the vanished avatars,
What candor-heated stars,
What crimson hells,
Consumed us long ago but cleansed us not,
Nor could absolve us of the sombre blot!
Yea, all the Moloch-hearted suns and hells
Consumed us long ago but cleansed us not!

Where limbos of unfathomed ice immure,
Shall yet we couch secure
Our sundered day?
What sea wherein the unshapen planets sleep
Shall make us one in its potential deep —
Washing the lethal dross of self away —
What sea wherein the unshapen planets sleep?

The Isle of Saturn



In one of these (islands) the barbarians
feign that Saturn is held prisoner by Zeus.

PLUTARCH

Say, what seer, what poet has beheld Saturnia?
Clio or Euterpe, tell, if this you know:
Zones of guardian storm unslackening, sempiternal
Doldrums of the flat untraversable foam
Drive the encroaching keels to leeward,

So no sailor glimpses it, no chart includes.
Never yet has man profaned it, never printed
Xanthic sands wherever duskier flames the blue
For tall marble cliffs whereon the hippogriffin
Rears his head and gazes seaward,

Unalarmed, and all replete with grainy grasses.
Slant with wind, and drenched by spindrift, walls of cypress
Closely ward untended crofts where mellowed apples
Fall not from the bough to break the cyclic silence
Of a mighty myth that slumbers.

There, in calamus and the lush hemlock matted,
By the muffled windings of unnumurous streams,
Black gigantic swans that winter in strange planets,

Age to age returning, make their nests, and rear
Shadowy broods that no one numbers.

There the dragon-mother, couched amid the boulders,
High on rugged fells that rim the smoothed main,
Hatches out her blotched and horny young, with folded
Wings that open soon in fluttered, brief essays —
Tumbling on the downs and tors.

Darkly, in the gaunt and gleamless mountain-sides,
Drowse the metals for the mail of gods reawakened;
And the trees of savage forests hold on high
Still-unshapen hafts of Titan battle-maces
To be wielded in vast wars.

Stretched between two peaks, within a lea-wide valley,
Saturn, slumbering, heals his wounds through halcyon cycles:
Rains and dews like balm anoint him; wild grapes clamber
Over him with ripening clusters; and black ivy
Plaits his golden beard uncombed.

Others there are sleeping... Will they haply waken —
Monstrous phantoms, striding down from fell and highland,
Crawling like to rivered lava through the dale-beds? —
Gods who rose and reigned and died before the Titans,
Lying in topless tombs undomed.

Oblivion



The temple's ruin crowns the promontory.
Close-shrouded with the root-enwoven sod,
The marble goddess, the bronze demigod,
Mingle their broken and their tarnished glory.

Sometimes a lonely herdsman, going past
With horn that sobs some plangent old refrain,
Filling the air and the calm seas again,
Arises darkly on the clear blue vast.

Mother of gods, the mellowing earth will teem,
And all the vain sweet eloquence of spring
A fresh acanthus for the column bring;

But man, oblivious of his fathers' dream,
Untrembling hears the Nereusean moan
Of ocean grieving for the sirens flown.

Revenant



I am the spectre who returns
Unto some desolate world in min borne afar
On the black flowing of Lethean skies:
Ever I search, in cryptic galleries,
The void sarcophagi, the broken urns
Of many a vanished avatar;
Or haunt the gloom of crumbling pylons vast
In temples that enshrine the shadowy past.
Viewless, impalpable, and fleet,
I roam stupendous avenues, and greet
Familiar sphinxes carved from everlasting stone,
Or the fair, brittle gods of long ago,
Decayed and fallen low.
And there I mark the tail clepsammiae
That time has overthrown,
And empty clepsydrae,
And dials drowned in umbrage never-lifting;
And there, on rusty parapegms,
I read the ephemerides
Of antique stars and eider planets drifting
Oblivionward in night;
And there, with purples of the tomb bedlight
And crowned with funereal gems,
I bold awhile the throne
Whereon mine immemorial selves have sate,

Canopied by the triple-tinted glory
Of the three suns forever paled and flown.

I am the spectre who returns
And dwells content with his forlorn estate
In mansions lost and hoary
Where no lamp burns;
Who trysts within the sepulchre,
And finds the ancient shadows lovelier
Than gardens all emblazed with sevenfold noon,
Or topaz-built towers
That throng below some iris-pouring moon.
Exiled and homeless in the younger stars,
Henceforth I shah inhabit that grey clime
Whose days belong to primal calendars;
Nor would I come again
Back to the garish terrene hours:
For I am free of vaults unfathomable
And treasures lost from time:
With bat and vampire there
I fit through sombre skies immeasurable
Or fly adown the unending subterranean;
Mummied and ceremented,
I sit in councils of the kingly dead,
And oftentimes for vestiture I wear
The granite of great idols looming darkly
In atlantean fanes;
Or closely now and starkly

I ding as dings the attenuating air
About the ruins bare.

In Slumber



The stench of stagnant waters broke my dream,
Wherethrough had run, with living murmur and gleam,
The Rivers four of the Earthly Paradise:
From the azured flame of those effulgent skies
And valleys lifting censers of vast bloom,
I was drawn down into a deathlier gloom
Than lies on Styx's fountain. By such light
As shows the newly damned their dolorous plight,
I trod the shuddering soil of that demesne
Whence larvae swarmed, malignant and obscene,
Like writhen mists from some Maremma reeking:
Through the gross air, fell incubi went seeking
Their prey that slumbered helpless; at my knee
There clung the python-bodied succubi;
I heard the wail of them that walked apart,
Each with a suckling vampire at his heart;
And, as I stumbled loathly on, the ground
Was rent with noiseless thunder all around
To pits that teemed with direr prodigies:
Grey, headless coils, and worm-shaped infamies
Unmeasured, rose above the sun that rotted
Black as a corpse in heavens thick and clotted;
The rusty clang and shaken soot of wings
Deafened and stifled me; from pestilent springs
Slime-mantled horrors boiled with fume and hiss

To plunge in frothing fury down the abyss.
Then, from an outmost circle of that hell,
The tumbling harpies came, detestable,
With beaks that in long tatters tore my breast
And wove from these their crimson, wattled nest.

Cambion



I am that spawn of witch and demon
By time's mad prophets long foretold:
The unnamed fear of king and freeman,
I roam the lawless outland wold,
Couching amid the weeds and mould
With dire Alecto for my leman.

I am that hidden piper, playing
The Pan-like strains of malefice
That lure the lonely traveller, straying
Upon the crumbling precipice:
To filmed morass or blind abyss
His feet must follow, never staying.

I am that swart, unseen pursuer
Whose lust begets a changeling breed:
All women know me for their wooer:
Mine is the whisper the maidens heed
At twilight; mine the spells that lead
The matron to the nighted moor.

I am that messenger whose call
Convenes dark mage and banished lord
And branded witch and whip-flayed thrall,
To plot, amid the madness poured

On the black Sabbat's frothing horde,
The bale of realms, the planet's fall.

The Witch with Eyes of Amber



I met a witch with amber eyes
Who slowly sang a scarlet rune,
Shifting to an icy laughter
Like the laughter of the moon.

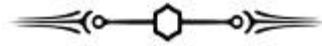
Red as a wanton's was her mouth,
And fair the breast she bade me take
With a word that clove and clung
Burning like a furnace-flake.

But from her bright and lifted bosom,
When I touched it with my hand,
Came the many-needed coldness
Of a glacier-taken land.

And, lo! the witch with eyes of amber
Vanished like a blown-out flame
Leaving but the lichen-eaten
Stone that bore a blotted name.

The Outer Land

I



From the close valleys of thy love,
Where flowers of white and coral are
And the soft gloom of cave and grove,
How have I wandered, spent and fat,
By fell and mountain thence forbanned,
Into this lamia-haunted land?

I could not know the coiling path,
Pebbled with sard and lazuli,
Would lead me to the desert's wrath,
The rancor of the glaring sky,
The tarns that like stirred serpents hiss,
The dens of drake and cockatrice.

I roam a limbo long abhorred,
Whose dread horizons flame and flow
Like iron from a furnace poured:
A bournless realm of sterile woe,
Where mad mirages fill the dawn
With roses lost and fountains gone.

O land where dolent monsters mate!
I know the lusts that howl and run
When the red stones reverberate

The soot-black lecheries that wail
From Hinnom to the moons of bale.

What desert naiads, amorous,
Have drawn me to their sunken strand!
How many a desert succubus
Has clasped me on her couch of sand!
What liches foul, with breast nor face,
Have seemed to bear thy beauty's grace!

What voices have besought me there
With sweet illusion of thine own,
Luring me, rapt and unaware,
To pits where dying demons moan!
What marble limbs have gleamed as thine —
Slow-sinking into sand or brine!

Briefly, in desert hermitages,
I have lain down in my despair,
Dreaming to sleep as slept the sages:
But unseen lust oppressed the air,
And crimson dreams of incubi,
And thirst of anthropophagi.

II

Entire, from mountains scaled at noon,
I scan the realm of my duress:
Deep-cloven plain and nipples dune,
Like to some sleeping giantess,

Pale and supine, by gods desired
With hearts deliriously fired.

Still without respite, I must follow
Where the faint, exile tills bequeath
Their bitterness to gulf and hollow.
Still the blown dusts of ruin breathe,
Fretting my face. My feet return
By salt-bright shores that blind and burn.

Silence immeasurable creeps
Across my path... My sharpened ears
Are dinned with tumult from the deeps,
Are frayed by whispers of the spheres;
And darkly, in the sepulchre,
I hear the strident dead confer.

Gnawed by unceasing solitude,
The secret veils of sight grow thin:
High Domes that dazzle and elude,
Columns of darkling god and djinn
Appear; and things forbidden seem
Unsealed as in some awful dream.

My heart, consumed yet unconsuming,
Burns like a dreadful, ardent sun,
The horror of strange nights illuming:
Shall yet I find the ways foregone,
And speak, before the heart of thee,
The still-remembered Sesame?

Luna Aeternalis



By an alien dream despatched and driven
In a land to strange stars given,
Stars that summoned forth the moon,
Singing a strange red eldritch rune,
I heard the coming of the moon
With tremulous rim that clomb and rang,
Whose rondure on the horizon rang
A gong distinct with silvern clang,
Re-echoing distantly, until,
Arisen soon,
In silent silver stood the moon
Above the horizon ringing still.

Half-waned and hollow was her brow,
And caverned by the night; but now
Her twilight turned the stars' loud rune
To muted music in a swoon,
Her low light lulled the stars to drowse,
Flicker and fail, and vaguely rouse:
I felt the silence come and go
As the red stars muttered low...

Old with moonlight lay the night,
And on the desert lay
Ancient and unending light
That assured not of the day;

For the half-moon stood to stay
Fixed at the heavens' height
And eternal ere the day.

Triumphant stood the moon
In a false and cold and constant noon:
Surely in conflict fell
The true, lost sun of noon;
The golden might of Uriel
Met some white demon of the moon.

By an alien dream despatched and driven,
I found a land to demons given,
To silvern, silent demons given
That flew and fluttered from out the moon,
Weaving about her tomb-white face
With mop and mow and mad grimace,
And circling down from the semilune
In a serpentine and sinister dance,
To pirouette and pause and prance,
To withdraw and advance,
All in a wan eternal dance.

Ye Shall Return



Ye who have dwelt in palaces
Opulent and decayed and lone
Upon oblivion's closer shore,
But in some daemon-stirred unrest

Departing thence, sojourn awhile
By fevered fens and driven seas,
Or in the moil of towns unclean
And fumes of toiling titan fires;

Or climb the sharpened mountain-horns
To see earth's kingdoms gleam afar,
Litters with promise and mirage
Beneath a mistless diamond vault;

Or, pausing in Mylitta's vales
At yonic altars carved to sin,
Purchase the ancient carnal kiss
Forewritten on the lips of clay:-

Know surely that ye shall return
Into the shadow-land ye left,
And draw again your languored breath
Where breathe the poppies of the dusk.

Spells and Philtres (1958)



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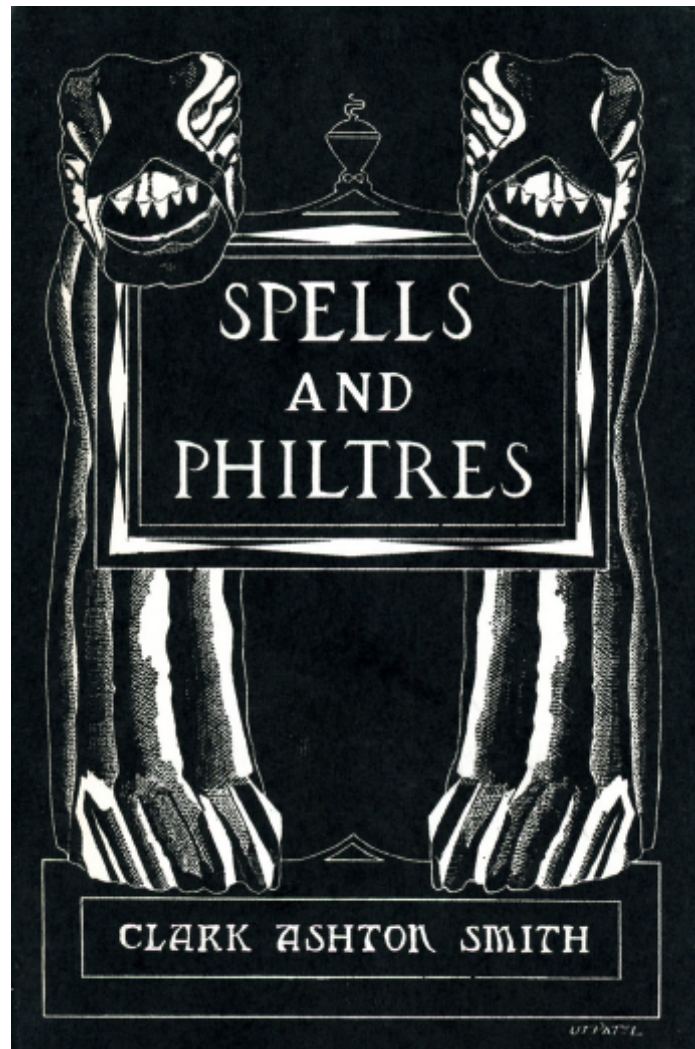
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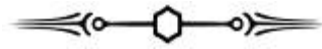
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The first edition

Didus ineptus



Absurd, magnificent, and huger
than swan or turkey-cock, this flightless antique pigeon
once roamed at his anachronistic leisure
among the broad-leaved travelers' trees and aloes
upon that manless isle,
dawnward from Madagascar,
which may have been old Pliny's isle of Cerne.
Laying in peace the large, the one white egg
on the mat of woodland grass
through ages of that slothfull praradise,
the dodo flourlshed in his archaic fashion,
learning no need of wings and having but few feathers,
exempt from competition
save of his only fellow-islanders,
the wingless rail, the short-winged heron,
some curious doves and parroquets
and the fruit-gorging bat:
of which the well-winged have survived alone.
Then came the eastward-driving Portuguese,
the Dutch, the French, the English,
to try in turn the dodo's meat, to find no mode
nor amount of cooking made it palatable,
and yet to leave of him no remnant
other than drawings, paintings, and a legend

or something great and harmless and grotesque...

And no one knows

what colonist it was who killed the last

of the prodigious brood, nor in

what century he earned his dim distinction...

So passers wonder

unnoted and unrumored from the earth.

Thebaid



Here is the solitude
Unknown to Stylites or Anthony;
A place of bleak illumination
Clean-stripped of clouds and dust,
Ultimate as the apogean moon;
Where codes and cults, philosophies and gods
Thin out and varnish on the waste and vast
Like smoke of fires gone cold
In nomad camps deserted yesterday.

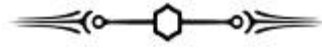
Here is the infinite unveiled
In visions not of evil or of good;
And the night looks down on us
With only suns for eyes;
And knowledge is our delirium,
The bringer of new appearances,
The breeder of new apparitions.

What shall we do
For whom the heavens are throneless, and there is
No demon prince to supplicate and serve?
Shall we pray for succor to the rocks
Or beg the sea for aid?
The breath of prayer, the windiness of imploration,
Puffs not against the gale

Nor blows with it in power and violence
Beyond the failing of the owlet's cry.

Secret Love

(From Christophe des Laurières)

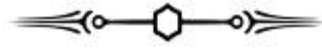


Hung round with heavy silence fold on fold,
Thy love, within my veiled and votive heart,
Is like a darkling Venus, shrined apart
In some lost city legendless and old
Whose mobled walls and domes of blinded gold
Lapse in the sands of Syria; none may start
The antique doors, and tapestries of art
Where all the lost luxurious dreams are told,

To see, within a spikenard-scented room,
The gleam of clear marmoreal breast and limb —
The goddess, with her crescent mouth upturned
To meet the kiss of Adon in the gloom;
Her loins grown languid with a dream of him
For whom their pale Pentelic altar burned.

The Pagan

(From Christophe des Laurières)



In amaranthine days ere time was born
My home was in some ocean-fronting land
Where idle sirens on the pearl-white sand
With laughters hailed the wheedling Triton's horn.

Adown the cliffs I saw red satyrs clamber,
To stare at emerald evening on the bay
Where floating sea-nymphs from the riven spray
Offered their swelling deltas fleeced with amber.

And once, when flowering laurel spiced the air,
Between the boughs I caught a dryad's hair
And all her yielded youth was mind to hold;

And after, when the breathless hour was done,
We stretched our glowing languor in the sun,
My face against her body's moss of gold.

Tired Gardener



Cherish them not,
the ostentatious roses grown with care
extravagant, the Tyrian fuchsias drooping
with heaviness of over-nurtured bloom,
and orchid-miming irises that speak too loud
of opulence and sumptuous circumstance:
cherish them not, O gardener,
knowing how soon
the desert breathes in every Babylon
and withers all things that man has tilled and trained
too often not for mere beauty's sake
but only to prove the old Mammonian power;
knowing how soon
the lovely weeds half-disinherited
return, and banished grasses break
the squares and circles of the flowery plots
and beard the creviced fountains.

Turn rather
to sand-verbenas yellow as the sun
that flourish on the crumbling dunes,
to yarrow, and the blackbird-ridden reeds
and willows following the dark sunken channel
of marsh-lost waters toward the sea.
Turn rather

where springs the pale and migniard mountain-phlox
in basins granite-rimmed,
and the dwarf alpine manzanitas
make arabesques upon the sheeted stone;
turn rather
to lichens charting upon trunk and boulder
the track of centuries unclocked:
these shall be planted, these be tended
never by swink and sweat of any laborer;
and these
shall flower the unmanned eternity of earth
when the last empire dies, a fat mandragora
uprooted by its rebel gardeners.

Nada



This wakeful death affords not any rift
where root of weed or blossom cleaves the tomb.
Ungrown as yet, no yewen bowers lift,
bringing serene misericordal gloom
upon this sepulture adjust and bare,
writ with a legend plain to one alone
whose voice could quicken the unvital air,
recalling Lazarus from his room of stone.

Oblivion's river flows in other lands
than this where memory feeds a mordant spring:
the walking dead beseech with parching hands
the cool, far shadow of the raven's wing;
and, leaning from the mouldered bed of lust,
love's skeleton writes Nada in the dust.

High Surf



Loud as the Trump that made the mortised walls
Of Jericho to tremble and lean and sway,
The voice of ocean sweeps this granite verge.
The cormorants today,
Black-diving through the falling walls of serge,
Float not too near the rocks;
And smoky, white haired phantoms ride the long-spined rollers
Curving across the bay
From gulfs that round Cipango, arc Cathay.

For me,
Who stand enchanted and exalt,
Seized up into a short eternity,
No anger and no sorrow that men feign
Informs the risen main:
I here alone the impassable roar
Of years and centuries and cycles rolling
Under that solar and galactic vault,
Over the cliffs and cities, over the mountains
From shore to crumbing shore.

The Centaur



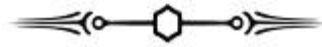
I belong to those manifold Existences
Once known, or once suspected,
That exist no more for man.

Was it not well to flee
Into the boundless realms of legend
Lest man should bridle me?

Sometimes I am glimpsed by poets
Whose eyes have not been blinded
By the hell-bright lamps of cities,
Who have not sent their souls
To be devoured by robot minotaurs
In the infamous Labyrinths of steel and mortar.

I know the freedom of fantastic things,
Ranging in fantasy.
I leap and bound and run
Below another sun.
Was it not well to flee
Long, long ago, lest man should bridle me?

Said the Dreamer



My dreams were nests of horror, whimsey-wrought
With orts and shreds from old abysses brought;
Were eyries built by condor-wingèd awe,
Enskied on somber pinnacles of thought.

Fantastical, I saw the visions shift
Like bubbles that a Titan's breath might lift,
Drowning in seas more deep than his despair —
Iron-colored, soon to shatter or to drift;

Or like illumined crystals fallen from hands
Of gods, that cloud interiorly with lands
Of wider spheres exalted past the sun,
Or burst while thought in idle question stands.

Conscious of gulfs in which I dared not gaze,
I passed on faltering and imperilled ways,
Through lands where hoary mountains danced and roared
To baleful pygmies piping hellish lays.

The flames that wait against the end of things
Were light and limit to my wanderings.
Through deserts bleaching like the bones of death
Aback I fled, and faltered on spent wings

In night Cimmerian, thronged with sorceries,
Where lightnings flamed on empty sands and seas ;

Or feared the leopard-crouch of pallid shapes
In Saracenic arches of black trees.

Then in the dream I dreamt that Time was done:
Light still endured, whose touch I might not shun,
Though at my back I heard the lips of Night
Puff out the flaring flambeau of the sun.

I leaned from some black precipice, to see
The pits beneath. One came, not far from me,
To hurled therein the sockets of the stars
And shells of worlds that rattled empty.

The Nameless Wraith



As one who seeks the silver moth of night
Where moonless gardens lose the afterglow,
My soul went forth ineffably, to know
Some vaguer vision unrevealed of light.

From halcyon fells whereon the falcons range,
From Hesper, and the sunsets mountain-born,
And From the trembling freshness of the morn
I turned me to a dreamland still and strange.

It seemed the hueless ashes of the day
And darkened glories filled that glooming world :
The spectrum of hesternal suns was furled
In immemorial valleys vast and grey.

Ruins, and wrecks of many a foundered year,
Doubtfully known, bestrewed the unvisioned verge,
Where, from unsounding reaches of blind surge,
Some nameless wraith of beauty fluttered near.

Was it the dove from shrines of lost delight?
The nightingale from love's necropolis ?
What dream-led messenger of time's abyss
Came from the dark, and vanished in the night ?

The Blindness of Orion



So blind Orion, groping for the morn
With eyes uplift whereon forever hung
Infinite burden and suspense of night,
Had clomb the long and mountain-ending vast,
Led by the Cyclops. Many a dim ravine
Where serried pines were silent ere the dawn
And many a slope or terrace of the snow,
Pure as Pentelic marble for the tread
Of roseal-footed light, lay far behind
Still drowned in stagnant purples. Toiling up
Even to the very threshold of the heavens,
They heard the ascending eagles hail the sun
Round the forsaken throne of Phosphorus,
Until the morning's levin-colored ray
Lightened upon the Cyclops, and he paused,
And over him ethereal glory drave
To rouse the dreaming colors in the cloud,
To give the sea its immemorial green
And strike the towering cities into gold
Along the low horizon.

Then, at last,
On dark Orion groping for the suns,
From out the sole, the Appollonian source,
Returning vision flowed, and he had power

And privilege once more upon the light,
And might receive its seven ministers,
Even with gathering rays of stars remote,
And take the tithe of beauty proffered still
By terrene shapes and images — by forms
Of flowers and statues and of women dancing;
Of sapling laurels, ancient olives gnarled;
The noontide shapes of headlands and of clouds;
The meres that curve in darkening amaranth
Amid the sunset range; and seas and rivers
Straight-tided or with currents serpentine
Dividing variously their protean shores.

Jungle Twilight



From teak and tamarind and palm
The heavy sun goes down unseen;
The jungle drowns in duskier green;
And quickening perfumes vespertine
Alone assail the sluggish calm.

Narcotic silence, opiate gloom:
The painted parakeets are gone,
The blazoned butterflies withdrawn.
Nocturnal blossoms, weird and wan,
Like phantom wings and faces bloom.

In the high trees the darkness grows,
And, rising, overbrims the sky.
Like a black serpent gliding by
‘Neath woven creepers covertly,
Unknown and near, the river flows;

Where deeper in oblivion’s tide
The dateless, fair pagodas fall,
And, winding on the toppled wall
Where carved gods hold carnival,
The cobra couples with his bride.

The Phoenix



I, I alone have seen the Phoenix fail,
His regal wings their vibrant glories veil
In gyres of baffled crimson, flagging gold
Below the heaven of his conquests old.
I, I alone have seen the Phoenix build
His pyre with bitter myrrh and spices filled
Amid the ardent waste; and none but I
Has known his death and immortality,
Has watched the yellowy teeth of flame consume
Shell-tinted beak and heaven-painted plume,
Has heard the fatal anguish of his cries
And felt the fierce despair with which he dies
Oblivious of that rebirth to he.
Nor shall another know the mystery
Of flames that turn to plumes, and ashes stirred
To yield once more the fiery-crested bird
With beating rainbow pinions that arise
And take again the lost Sabeen skies.

The Prophet Speaks



City forbidden by seer and god and devil!
In glory less than Tyre or fabled Ys,
But more than they in mere, surpassing evil!

Yea, black Atlantis, fallen beneath dim seas
For sinful lore and rites to demons done,
Bore not the weight of such iniquities.

Your altars with a primal foulness run,
Where the worm hears the thousand-throated hymn...
And all the sunsets write your malison,

And all, the stars unrolled from heaven's rim
Declare the doom which I alone may read
In moving ciphers numberless and dim.

O city consecrate to crime and greed!
O scorner of the Muses' messenger!
Within your heart the hidden maggots breed.

Against your piers the nether seas confer;
Against your towers the typhons in their slumber
In sealed abysms darkly mutter and stir:

They dream the day when earth shall disencumber
Her bosom of your sprawled and beetling piles;
When tides that bore your vessels without number

Shall turn your hills to foam-enshrouded isles,
And, ebbing, leave but slime and desolation,
Ruin and rust, through all your riven miles.

On you shall fall a starker devastation
Than came upon Tuloom and Tarshish old,
In you shall dwell the last abomination.

The dust of all your mansions and the mould
Shall move in changing mounds and clouds parted
About the wingless air, the footless wold.

The sea, withdrawn from littorals desert-hearted,
Shall leave you to the silence of the sky —
A place fordone, forlorn, unnamed, uncharted,

Where naught molests the sluggish crotali.

Farewell to Eros



Lord of the many pangs, the single ecstasy!
From all my rose-red temple builded in thy name,
Pass dawnward with no blasphemies of praise or blame,
No whine of suppliant or moan of psaltery.

Not now the weary god deserts the worshipper,
The worshipper the god ... but in some cryptic room
A tocsin tells with arras-deadened tones of doom
That hour which veils the shrine and stills the chorister.

Others will make libation, chant thy litanies...
But, when the glamored moons on immost Stygia glare
And quenchlessly, the demon-calling altars flare,
I shall go forth to madder gods and mysteries.

And through Zothique and primal Thule wandering,
A pilgrim to the shrines where elder Shadows dwell,
Perhaps I shall behold such lusters visible
As turn to ash the living opal of thy wing.

Haply those islands where the sunsets sink in rest
Will yield, O Love, the slumber that thou hast not given;
Or the broad-bosomed flowers of some vermilion heaven
Will make my senses fail as on no mortal breast.

Perchance the wind, on Aquilonian marches blowing
From the low mountains isled in seaas of russet grass,

Will make among the reeds a sweeter shuddering pass
Than tremors through the chorded flesh of women flowing.

Perchance the fountains of the dolorous rivers four
In Dis, will quench the thirst thy wine assuages never;
And in my veins will mount a twice-infuriate fever
When the black, burning noons upon Cimmeria pour.

Yea, in those ultimate lands that will outlast the Earth,
Being but dream and fable, myth and fantasy,
I shall forget ... or find some image reared of thee,
Dreadful and radiant, far from death, remote from birth.

Alternative



Who turns him from his earthly love
Must other lovers meet and prove:
Through plunging lands careened from light
Into the crimson-starred abyss,
He goes by sunken stairs, to kiss
The coal-hot lips of Baaltis
And Lilith in the nether night.

Or else, on mountains noonward-piled,
He climbs the planished walls, beguiled
By wispy, wavering spectres born
Of snow and sun; till, starkly mad
In some delirium strange and glad,
He clasps an ice-limbed oread
Upon the slippery silver horn.

Only to One Returned



Often, before the mortal mouth has known
What fruit the vagrant phoenixes devour
In Melusina's or Armida's bower,
Not fully savored are the apples grown
In charmless orchards closed about with stone:
Only to one returned, in some late hour,
From shores of lote where guardian scyllas glower,
The sweetness of the fruits of earth is shown.

Thus, turning from translunar seasons bleak,
Or borderlands of Endor, ill to seek,
Where necromancy's wandering wisps grow dim
And Lilith and her night-bound daughters dwell,
Love finds again some fleshly citadel,
Safe-walled, with many a pleasance sweet to him.

Anteros



What voice, O vengeful Anteros,
Has called thee from the seedless weald ? —
Dark sower of the tares of loss
Amid the foison of love's field!
What mouth, O mournful Anteros,
Must eat the grain the seasons yield?

Thy touch, O mortal Anteros,
Has turned the sapphic laurel sere,
Thy wings have cast their night across
The dial of our Saturnian year,
The cypress, O sad Anteros,
Grew darker when thou drewest near...

O lover, thy black prayer unsay,
Who called on baleful Anteros!
Crown thee with nettles, kneel, and lay
Thy brows upon love's altar close,
To the departing Eros pray
Against the wrath of Anteros.

No Stranger Dream



One rapid gesture of a supple arm
Has made your beauty strange and fabulous:
Mystery folds you and reveals you, thus
Weaving anew the seven-circled charm.

Love needs no stranger dream: your face calls back
The feet that flying Lemures have drawn
To years beyond the darkness and the dawn;
And thrusts afar the impending Zodiac.

He that has been the pilgrim of dark shrines,
And sued the silver wraith of Baaltis,
Would ask no wonder more arcane than this: —

To watch, in a place of summer grass and pines,
The spangled spectrum somnolently spun
In your deep hair by the seaward-turning sun.

Do You Forget, Enchantress?



The Muses all are silent for your sake:
While night and distance take
The hamadryad's hill, the naiad's vale,
Low droops the hippocentaur's golden tail,
And sleep has whelmed the satyrs in the brake.

Unplucked, the laurels stand as long ago;
The balms of Eros blow
Rose-red and secret in the cedars' pall...
Do you forget, enchantress, or recall
The world you fashioned once, and now forgo?

Where, Venus-like from Lethe and the abyss,
Might rise the abandoned bliss;
Where the mute Muses bide your summoning word;
Where darkling faun and daemon drowse unstirred,
Waiting the invocation of your kiss.

Necromancy



My heart is made a necromancer's glass,
Where homeless forms and exile phantoms teem,
Where faces of forgotten sorrows gleam
And dead despairs archaic peer and pass:
Grey longings of some weary heart that was
Possess me, and the multiple, supreme,
Unwilderer hope and star-emblazoned dream
Of questing armies... Ancient queen and lass,
Risen vampire-like from out the wormy mould,
Deep in the magic mirror of my heart
Behold their perished beauty, and depart.
And now, from black aphelions far and cold,
Swimming in deathly light on charnel skies,
The enormous ghosts of bygone worlds arise.

Dialogue



One said: "I have seen, from cliffs of doom,
The seven hells flame up in flower
Like a million upas trees that tower,
Massing their realms of poisonous bloom.

I have gone down where dragons writhe,
Mating within the nadir slime;
I have caressed in some mad clime
The Gorgon's ringlets, long and lithe."

Another answered: "I have known
The undated hour of agony
When sightless terror leers and crawls

Out of mere soil and simple stone;
When horror seeps from out four walls
And trickles from the unclouded sky."

October



The blood of wounded love is on your leaves, October,
And in your seaward wind the sigh of love foredone:
Though I should fold them round me, cerement-like and sober,
In all your mist and rain is no oblivion,
Where memory clings the closer for the perished sun.
The blood of wounded love is on your leaves, October.

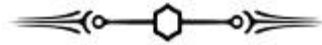
By you I am betrayed to all my memories,
Autumn, whose cleaving colors are a fallen sword!
Your distant vales are blue as Aidenn, yet no ease
I find therein, but pain against my coming stored:
Autumn, whose heart is one with all lost things adored,
By you I am betrayed to all my memories.

I would the mounded snow of mountains hyperborean
Were heaped upon your latest ember, quenching it!
In some tremendous world of ice, or world marmorean,
I would entomb for aye my fevers infinite: —
Yea, well it were to lie in frozen sleep unlit
Beneath the mounded snow of mountains hyperborean.

Ah, that my love and all your leaves, on Lethe drifting
Were borne, and cast upon the secret isles of sleep,
Where love and slumber are the same, and suns unlifting
And gods and men go down to quaff the dreamless deep:

Autumn, I would that thou and I were one in sleep,
With this my love and all your leaves on Lethe drifting.

Tolometh



In billow-lost Posedonis
I was the black god of the abyss:
My three horns were of similor
Above my double diadem;
My one eye was a moon-bright gem
Found in a monstrous meteor.

Incredible far peoples came,
Called by the thunders of my fame,
And passed before my terraced throne
Where titan pards and lions stood,
As pours a never-lapsing flood
Before the winds of winter blown.

Below my glooming architraves,
One brown eternal file of slaves
Came in from mines of chalcedon,
And camels from the long plateaus
Laid down their sard and peridoz,
Their incense and their cinnamon.

The star-born evil that I brought
Through all the ancient land was wrought:
All women took my yoke of shame;

I reared, through sumless centuries,
The thrones of hell-black wizardries,
The hecatombs of blood and flame.

But now, within my sunken walls,
The slow blind ocean-serpent crawls,
And sea-worms are my ministers,
And wandering fishes pass me now
Or press before mine eyeless brow
As once the thronging worshippers...

And yet, in ways outpassing thought,
Men worship me that know me not.
They work my will. I shall arise
In that last dawn of atom-fire,
To stand upon the planet's pyre
And cast my shadow on the skies.

Disillusionment



I used to dream, long, long ago,
That the clouds were marvelous white elephants
Journeying in droves to a far-off sacred city
That always made the sunset with the reflection of its altar-fires.

But now I am grown old and wise
And disillusioned,
And I know that the clouds are toy-animals for children,
And are made of cotton-batting,
Or at best are woven from a sort of mercerized wool,
And are always cut out
With patterns of tissue-paper.

Almost Anything



Superlatively sonorous
Like a saxophone full of brass tacks and coffin-nails;
Reverberantly rhythmical and rhythmically reverberant
Like the quobbing of a foetus five months old
In the womb of a she-baboon;
Imperial, romantic and picturesque
Like a merd-brown fog slinking away through slum alleys
And over the city dump;
Fair and pulchritudinous as a female Hottentot with buttocks two axe-
handles broad
And eyes that shine like rotten mackerel by moonlight;
More savorous than Gorgonzola buried for two months
At the bottom of a ship-load of guano;
Soft and voluptuous
Like the bosom of an acaleph that is more than slightly moribund;
And fragrant as a room
Where a cat was shut in by mistake...

But you say that my meaning is obscure,
And that it is hard to understand what I am referring to:
I ask you,
Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère,
What is the use of writing this modernist poetry
If one is not permitted
To be decently or indecently cryptic on occasion?...

And as for the meaning —
Well, I am not any too sure myself,
But if you are really determined to know,
I suggest that you refer the matter to some modernist critic.

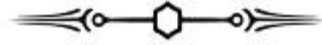
Parnassus À La Mode



Erato and Melpomene stumble in the stews
Through purblind alleys where a soused Apollo falls;
And bards pour out upon the altars of the Muse
A sacrifice from cuspidors and urinals.

Distillations (Haiku)

Fence And Wall



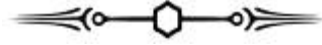
Old, with scattered blocks,
Low-fallen beside the wire fence
Lies the wall of rocks.

Growth of Lichen



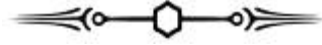
Over the rock the lichen
Stars the way whereon
Ten thousand suns have gone.

Cats in Winter Sunlight



In the slanted ray,
Huddling closely, my three cats
Slept the winter day.

Abandoned Plum-Orchard



Lichen, mistletoe, aloft
In the dying croft,
Leaf the winter trees.

Harvest Evening



Barnward come the cows
In the squash-hued sunset
Raddled by the buckeye boughs.

Willow-Cutting in Autumn



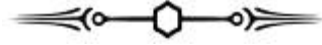
When I felled the willow,
From it flew a thousand
Slender wings of yellow.

Late Pear-Pruner



When I pruned the pear-trees,
Buds and blossoms falling
Strewed the path of spring.

Geese in the Spring Night



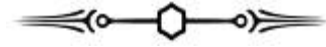
My lone heart afar
Trails the geese no longer heard
Below the northern star.

The Sparrow's Nest



I found the sparrow's nest
Where the thorned blackberries reach
Boughs of unpruned peach.

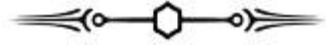
The Last Apricot



When I came to pluck it,
Fallen, splashed in rot
Was the last apricot.

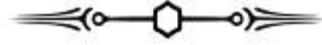
Strange Miniatures

Unicorn



Over fern, over thorn,
Rose the banded moonbow horn
Of the unicorn.

Untold Arabian Fable



Balkis feeds

Topaz grain and ruby seeds

To an uncouth fledgeling roc.

A Hunter Meets the Martichoras



Through his three rows of teeth
The martichoras roared
Against my broken sword.

The Sciapod



Shaded by his palmy feet,
The sciapod
Roots his tresses in the sod.

The Monacle



He has one foot, one leg,
To bear him here and yonder
In lands of wonder.

Feast of St. Anthony



Birds of fable,
Phoenix, roc and simorg-anka,
Pecked my phantom-fruited table.

Paphnutius



From my Stylitean throne,
The crag turned to cloud,
The cloud returned to stone.

Philtre



Drunken with a thirsty spell,
Pygmies and giants warred
For the desert well.

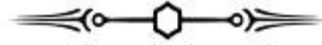
Perseus and Medusa



I met her mirrored stare:
The cycles of stone glories
Locked in the Gorgon's glare.

Quintrains

Attar of the Past



Though the roses
Wreath no more the garden
And the garden-dial,
Intenser grows the essence
In the vial.

Passing of An Elder God



In some Titan city, bells
Gigantically clangorous,
Endless, monotonous,
Ring for dead Enceladus
Monstrous knells.

Nightmare of the Lilliputian



I was a midge
With broken wing,
Crawling some colossal ridge
Underneath the world
At the roots of Ygdrasil.

Mithridates



Life the toxicologist
Proffers all the magistrals
Of death:
I chose love,
And I draw immortal breath.

Quiddity

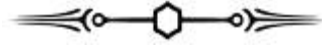


When we harbored in the stone,
With its stillness being one,
All its essence was our own:
Incarnate now, we abdicate
What kingdoms of the inanimate!

Translations

That Motley Drama

From Clérigo Herrero

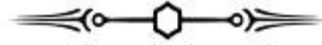


O meaningless and sterile wars!
O senseless virtue! stupid sin!
Our puerile drama will not win
The hoots or plaudits of the stars.

O world, with vulture beaks a-gape!
What god will care to curse or bless
Nature, the crouching leopardess,
Or man, the maniacal ape?

Where?

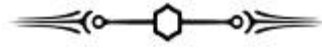
Clark Ashton Smith



Our sighs return to the air above,
Our tears return to the seas below.
Then tell me, beloved, when love is forgotten,
Where does love go?

Ecclesiastes

(From Leconte de Lisle)



Better a living dog (the Preacher said)
Than a dead lion. All things are shadow, save
To eat and drink. And the everlasting grave
With life's ephemeral nothingness is fed.

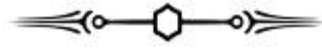
So mused he, sitting alone and somberly
On the high tower with eyes that roamed afar
As from a headland over world and star,
In the ancient nights, on his chair of ivory.

Old lover of the sun, who sorrowed thus,
Death too is but illusion, cheating us.
Happy is he, at one step freed of strife.

Always I hear, with frightened ears attending,
Amid the frenzy and horror never-ending,
The long, long roaring of eternal life.

Song of Autumn

(Translated "from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire")



I

Soon shall the night enfold us like a frozen pall...
The summer sinks from us, too radiant and short:
Even now, with harsh, funereal shock, I hear the fall
Of fagots that resound upon the paven court.

All the long winter comes to invade my being: choler,
Tremblings of hate and horror, toil too forced and rude;
And, like the sun in his pale hell of shadows polar,
My heart will be no more than crimson ice and blood.

I hear with frightful tremors every block that falls;
A builded scaffold echoes not more leadenly.
My soul is like a lonely tower whose ruinous walls
Go down to a battering-ram wielded unweariably.

It seems to me, half-lulled as by monotonous blows,
That, nailed somewhere in sullen haste, a coffin rings.
For whom?— 'Twas yesterday the summer; summer goes.
This sound is like the rumor of all departing things.

II

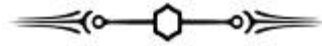
I love the light of your great eyes of green and amber!
But all the day is only bitterness to me,
And from your love I turn, and from the fire-lit chamber,
To watch the sun that shines far off upon the sea.

Yet love me still, and be as a mother, mild and tender,
For one who does you wrong, for this ungrateful one,
Sweetheart or sister, be the soft, ephemeral splendor
Of the full-risen autumn or the setting sun.

Brief task! the tomb awaits, yawning and ravenous.
My brow upon your knees, in half-regretful dreams
I would relume the hot white summer flown from us,
And taste this aftermath of sweet and yellow beams.

The Metamorphoses of the Vampire

(Translated "from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire")



TURNING AND TWISTING like a serpent among embers, and kneading breasts against her iron stays, the woman in the meanwhile poured from her strawberry mouth a soliloquy that was pregnant with musk: "My lips are moist, and I know the art of losing in a deep bed the antiquated conscience. All tears are dried upon my triumphant breasts, and I cause the old to laugh with the laughter of children. For those who see naked and without veils, I replace the sun, the moon, the stars and the heavens. I display so profound a knowledge of pleasure, such subtle erudition, when I stifle men in my velvet arms, or abandon to bites and kisses my shy, lascivious, frail and robust bosom, that even the impotent angels would damn themselves for me on my swooning mattresses"

When she had sucked all the marrow from my bones, and I turned languishingly to give her an amorous kiss, I beheld only a leathern bottle with slimy sides, filled full of pus! I closed my eyes in a cold terror and when I re-opened them to the living light, beside me, in lieu of the lusty mannequin that had seemed so well furnished with blood, there quivered the confused debris of a skeleton, creaking like a rusty weather-cock, or a sign-board that swings from an iron rod, swaying in the wind of winter nights.

Epigrams and Apothegms



THE COMMONEST AND gravest error of modernity lies in believing that antiquity is dead.

The forms and themes of poetry do not become outworn or exhausted. The exhaustion is in the individual poets.

It is a truism of the mystics that “as things are above, so are they below.” This raises a speculation as to just how far above, or how far below, the ecstasy of the mystics has carried them.

In the province of love, too much attention has been paid to ethics and not enough to esthetics.

Said Smygo, the iconoclast of Zothique: “Bear a hammer with thee always, and break down any terminus on which is written: “So far shalt thou pass but no farther go.”

Explanations are neither necessary, desirable, nor possible.

Philosophy: a sort of intellectual gymnastics.

Sophistication is the daughter of knowledge but not of wisdom.

Let us deal gently with our dead illusions, in the hope that they will also deal gently with us.

There are people who submerge themselves in surfaces, and drown in mirror-reflections.

The salvation of the barnyard fowl is the damnation of the eagle.

There are those who believe that the veil of Isis is a petticoat.

The modern intolerance toward what is called “painted speech,” toward “the grand manner,” springs too often from the instinctive resentment inspired in vulgar minds by all that savors of loftiness, exaltation, nobility, sublimity and aristocracy.

Personifications, when used in poetry should be vitalized in some signal way.

All human thought, all science, all religion, is the holding of a candle to the night of the universe.

The rebels of one age may become the reactionaries of the next. Rebellion, after all, is relative: it is merely a matter of disputing whatever happens to be prevalent or in a position of authority.

Rebel, fear the results of a successful revolution, which may turn you into a tyrant. From dreams of such success, awake in terror, like Anatole France’s Satan from the dream in which he became God.

There are poets whose obscurity consists in the fact that they perceive analogies and correspondences too remote or arcanic to be discerned by others.

Keats, speaking of poetry, advocated the principle of “loading the rifts with gold.” In latter times a new principle has been discovered, that of loading the gold with rifts. It has led to the winning of many poetry prizes.

Question all truisms. Error may be as universal as the air, and truth (if it exists) may inhere in some forgotten or disregarded belief. (Viz: Baudelaire's "unknown god.")

X, the unknown quantity. Deductions, drawn from logic that seems irrefutable, may be erroneous because X was not perceived and taken into account. Query: how many X's has science ignored or overlooked?

Certain minerals, colorless in ordinary light, are fluorescent under black light.

It is a ghastly but tenable proposition that the world is now ruled by the insane, whose increasing plurality will, in a few more generations, make probable the incarceration of all sane people born among them

The Hill of Dionysus (1962)



A SELECTION

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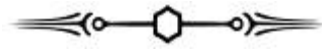
Sea Cycle

THE HILL OF DIONYSUS
A SELECTION

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

The first edition

Bacchante



Men say the gods have flown;
The Golden Age is but a fading story,
And Greece was transitory:
Yet on this hill hesperian we have known
The ancient madness and the ancient glory.

Under the thyrses upholden,
We have felt the thrilling presence of the god,
And you, Bacchante, shod
With moonfire, and with moonfire all enfolden,
Have danced upon the mystery-haunted sod.

With every autumn blossom,
And with the brown and verdant leaves of vine,
We have filled your hair divine;
From the cupped hollow of your delicious bosom
We have drunk wine, Bacchante, purple wine.

About us now the night
Grows mystical with gleams and shadows cast
By moons for ever past;
And in your steps, O dancer of our delight,
Wild phantoms move, invisible and fast.

Behind, before us sweep
Maenads and Bassarids in spectral rout

With many an unheard shout;
Cithaeron looms with every festal steep
Over this hill resolved to dream and doubt.

What Power flows through us,
And makes the old delirium mount amain,
And brims each ardent vein
With passion and with rapture perilous?
Dancer, of whom our votive hearts are fain,

You are that magic urn
Wherefrom is poured the pagan grammarie;
Until, accordantly,
Within our bardic blood and spirit burn
The dreams and fevers of antiquity.

Wizard's Love

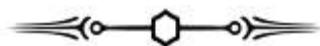


O perfect love, unhopèd-for, past despair!
I had not thought to find
Your face betwixt the terrene earth and air:
But deemed you lost in fabulous old lands
And rose-lit years to darkness long resigned.
O child, you cannot know
What magic and what miracles you bring
Within your tender hands;
What griefs are lulled to blissful slumbering,
Cushioned upon your deep and fragrant hair;
What gall-black bitterness of long ago,
Within my bosom sealed,
Ebbs gradually as might some desert well
Under your beauty's heaven, warm and fair,
And the green suns of your vertumnal eyes.

O beauty wrought of rapture and surprise,
Too dear for heart to know, or tongue to tell!
Now more and more you seem
Fantasy turned to flesh, incarnate dream.
Surely I called you with consummate spell
In desperate, forgotten wizardries,
With signs and sigils of dead goeties,
And evocations born of blood and pain
But deemed for ever vain.

Surely you came to me of yore, among
The teeming specters amorous
With faces veiled and splendid bosoms bare
That turned my sleep to fever and delight
In ever-desolate years when love was young.
Or I, perchance,
Begot you on some golden succubus
Amid the madness of the Sabbath's night
In earlier lives forevowed to Satanry
And sorcerous dark romance.
For all your heart and flesh are sib to me,
And in my soul's profound
Your face, an irrecoverable pearl,
Is ultimately drowned.
So thus, delicious girl!
Whether love's destiny be weal or woe,
I hold you now, and shall not let you go.

Resurrection



Sorceress and sorcerer,
Risen from the sepulcher,
From the deep, unhallowed ground,
We have found and we have bound
Each the other, as before,
With the fatal spells of yore,
With Sabbatic sign, and word
That Thessalian moons have heard.

Sorcerer and sorceress,
Hold we still our heathenness —
Loving without sin or shame —
As in years of stake and flame.
Share we now the witches' madness,
Wake the Hecatean gladness,
Call the demon named Delight
From his lair of burning night.

Love that was, and love to be,
Dwell within this wizardry:
Lay your arm my head beneath
As upon some nighted heath
Where we slumbered all alone
When the Sabbat's rout was flown;
Let me drink your dulcet breath
As in evenings after death.

Witch beloved from of old,
When upon Atlantis rolled
All the dire and wrathful deep,
You had kissed mine eyes asleep.
On my lids shall fall your lips
In the final sun's eclipse;
And your hand shall take my hand
In the last and utmost land.

Witch Dance



Between the windy, swirling fire
And all the stillness of the moon,
Sweet witch, you danced at my desire,
Turning some weird and lovely rune
To paces like the swirling fire.

As in the Sabbat's ancient round
With strange and subtle steps you went;
And toward the heavens and toward the ground
Your steeple-shapen hat was bent
As in the Sabbat's ancient round.

Upon the earth your paces wrought
A circle such as magians made...
And still some hidden thing you sought
With hands desirous, half afraid,
Beyond the ring your paces wrought.

Your supple youth and loveliness
A glamor left upon the air:
Whether to curse, whether to bless,
You wrought a stronger magic there
With your lithe youth and loveliness.

Your fingers, on the smoke and flame,
Moved in the mysterious conjuring;

You seemed to call a silent Name,
And lifted like an outstretched wing
Your somber gown against the flame.

What darkling and demonian Lord,
In fear or triumph, did you call?
Ah! was it then that you implored,
With secret signs equivocal,
The coming of the covens' Lord?

Sweet witch you conjured forth my heart
To answer always at your will!
Like Merlin, in some place apart,
It lies enthralled and captive still:
Sweet witch, you conjured thus my heart!

Paeon



You are the golden guerdon
Of all the iron days:
Hereafter song shall praise
Only your pagan breasts, and have for burden
Your wine-sweet lips, your blithe, delicious ways.

Hereafter with wild glory
Engarlanding your head,
Wreathing your name unsaid,
Song yet shall leave untold a fairer story
Than fabled loves and passions legended.

Song shall repeat hereafter
No sigh from love forlorn
Importunately torn:
For love has known how tender is your laughter
In hours between the moonfall and the morn.

The Knoll



All rimmed around with halcyon skies,
Filled with blue air and butterflies,
Mightily arched and intervalled,
And leaved with solemn emerald,
The century-lichened oaks arise

From this high knoll against the brine
Like those about Dodona's shrine:
For here Apollo still is god
And living dryads tread the sod
And love is Grecian and divine.

Not hidden with sad dreams of ill
Where Venus holds her vaulted hill,
For us the two, for us the three,
Here dwells the fair antiquity
Glad and august and pagan still.

And here how often has the sun
Brightened on breast and hair of One...
But never has the sun or shade
Amplify and long enough delayed
For love that dreads oblivion...

What shall the sealed horizons hold
For us, on future hills, untold —

The three, the two, that tarried here
Through azure mornings, hushed and dear,
And afternoons of forfeit gold?

Haply, by some dark ocean-stream,
These days shall dawn again in dream;
Through films of distance and of tears
We shall behold, in wintered years,
These butterflies that flit and gleam.

Interim



Darling, how near we lay
To Lethe on that day
When, wandering far amid the wreathèd fog
And through the veiling verdure spring had drawn
On slopes where fire had ravened years ago,
We paused awhile, and made our bed between
The mounting bushes green
And the black, fallen log...
Closely, more closely ever,
Like flames that meet and mingle in blown air,
Mouth drew to mouth, bosom to bosom there
In the long kiss that could not sever.
Sequestered and apart,
In death-grey mist and silence deeper furled,
While faded the wan world
In ghostliness and mystery retreating,
We felt the answering throb of heart to heart
Like one warm pulse amid oblivion beating.
And our love seemed a solitary flame
Soaring from lands of pallid nothingness
That had no bound nor name;
Where all hours that had been
And days to be
Were part of some abolished calendar;
Where all things fell away, and ebbed afar

As if dissolved within
The wavering vapors thin:
Yea, the pale mists, and life, and memory
And all things passed before our ecstasy
Like alien phantoms, furtive and unknown,
To their dim tombs returning...

O love unquenchable and stilly burning!
The peace at thy white core was made our own...
A little, and we too had surely passed
With incorporeal ease
Upon the voidness vast —
Going with those frail vapors like a breath,
Drifting from mortal ecstasy to death
Among the ghostly trees.

Reverie in August



The heat is like some drowsy drug
Laden with honey-foundered dreams...
Again the pagan forest seems
To couch and roof our pagan love,

Alone I wait... but not alone:
For something of you lingers yet,
Something returns, and subtly tells
Of all the beauty made our own.

Across the days that intervene
I breathe the fragrance of your hair,
One with the pine-embalsamed air:
Its warm oblivion covers me.

Again some gently murmured word
Lights the great fire in my blood...
Till rapture like a singing sun
Is in the riven spirit stirred.

And leaning thirstily and fain
On earth and air that burn with drouth,
I find again your pagan mouth —
Half-palpable, like dreams that fade.

Ode (O)



O young and dear and tender sorceress!
Your delicate, slim hands
Reweave the glamors of Hellenic lands
To enchant the noon or night —
With many a soft caress
Restore the lost and lyrical delight.
The limbs of maenads flown
Have given you their grace,
And immemorial Aprils haunt your face.
All that was not, but should have been, mine own,
Your gentle beauty brings
Till the heart finds again its forfeit wings.
The young, Favonian loves
That passed aversely, darkling and unknown,
About your bosom dwell like coted doves.
Long-fallen fruits by necromancy burn
Upon your lips; and perished planets rise
Into the beryl evening of your eyes;
And the lost autumns in your hair return.

In you each yesterday
Shall past tomorrow stay;
And love would linger here,
Letting your pulses tell his destined time
Through all the clement year:

Yea, having known your fair, Arcadian heart,
He would not thence depart:
Harsher it were than death
To face again the lonesome rain and rime,
And draw reluctant breath
From the grey rigors of an alien clime.

For An Antique Lyre



Still wanting you, perchance
How vainly love had waited,
An autumn faun belated
For whom the leaves like spectral dryads dance.

And time perhaps had run
A somber, songless river
Whence no nymph rises ever
With limbs that flash to lotus in the sun.

And happiness had been
A siren singing only
On shores unsought and lonely
Where Vesper falls to some untraveled visne.

And joy had tarried still,
A sleeping Venus hidden
In sunless halls forbidden
Within her undiscovered hollow hill.

Silent Hour



In this drear interim
Of days disconsolate, remote from thee,
Surely it were enough of happiness
To sit once more beside thee, and to see
Thy patient fingers press
The clay whereon, still inchoate and dim,
Wavers the face of some fair satyress,
Or dancer's form, or goddess revenant
From deep antiquity;
To watch throughout the sunned or lamplit hour
Thy tireless toil intent —
Speaking no word, while on my heart again
Full-tided love draws back in every vein
Like a dark sea through caverns refluent;
But deepens still the fountains of its power.
Thus, thus to wait, with eyes
That love thy drooping hair, thy bended brow,
Till the hour becomes an everlasting Now;
Till all the silence opens into flower —
Till some great rose of wonder and surprise
In secret, sudden bloom
With magic fragrance overbrims the room.

To One Absent



Return, to save me still from her,
The false and barren comforter,
Who wears in vain thy spectral mien
Amid the desert of my dearth — .
That ancient empress of the earth,
That lethal and immortal queen.

Return, to take this empty hand
And lead me in that longed-for land
Where still the years of Saturn roam;
Where satyrs rob the purpling vine
And the green-fruited laurels shine
Against the siren-cloven foam.

Return, with all the ancient loves,
Like Venus and her circling doves,
With Cyprian cinctures to unweave,
And snatches of some Lesbian air
To lighten this my long despair
Upon a saffron-bordered eve.

Return, to be the Muse of old
In songs and paeans manifold;
The sorceress of a secret garth

Distilling balms and philters sweet;
Bacchante, dancing on wild feet;
And goddess of the glowing hearth.

Bond



By the red seal redoubled of that kiss
When thy lips parted softly to my own
Ere the sun sank from doomed Poseidonis;

By nights of searing ecstasy and moan;
The night-wet bosoms in Pompeii bared,
And the pale breasts and limbs in Lesbos known;

By dreams and deities and dolours shared
Before the Olympian glory passed from Greece;
By sharp and secret raptures that we dared

In Druid towers of ocean-founded Ys;
By every cup of wine in Naishapur
We drank by turns even to the purple lees;

By the dark Sabbats, vowed to Lucifer,
Making us one before his muffled throne
In rites of sorceress and sorcerer;

By the sealed ways no prophet has foreshown,
Wheron our lips shall meet, our footsteps go: —
By these, by these I claim thee for mine own...

Even as I have claimed thee long ago.

Fragment



This I remember clearly: from stone to stepping-stone
I bore you in my arms across the quiet stream...
And yet I know not where nor when; nor whether in dream
It was, or in some former land, or land foreknown.

Willows there were, and leaves and flowers of arrowhead,
And the tall reeds that lifted up their bronzy maces...
Yet in what place among the long-forgotten places?
Or in what untold year, or year of ages sped?

What chanceful magic brings this moment back to me,
Or calls it from the murk and mist of worlds unborn? —
A burst of sun on Lethe boundless and forlorn,
A narrow circle of noon where else is mystery.

This I remember only, beloved, that it was you
I held with tender care and loving arms that yearned:
Your breasts were light upon my heart; your tresses burned
Between the nameless heavens and nameless waters blue.

Humors of Love



Our love has grown a thing too deep and grave
For touch and speech of trivial gallantries:
For we have wrought consummate sorceries
From which no lifted sign nor prayer may save:
To seize the perilous hour we have been brave;
And passion, past all fleshly ecstasies,
Has flung us into stilled eternities
Where the moment hung like some unfalling wave.

Yet, though our love outsoar the exalted clay
To stand in firmamental station fixed,
We find, with some enchanted memory mixed,
The laughs heard in Swift and Rabelais;
And, blended with the rapture and the woe,
Are drolleries of blithe Boccaccio.

Yerba Buena



The fragrant leaf and small white flower!
The fragile wreath my fingers twined
Amid your fleece in some lost hour
Flown seaward with the summer wind.

The fragile wreath my fingers twined
Still wafts a perfume wild and sweet
Flown seaward with the summer wind
Within that place where laurels meet —

Still wafts a perfume wild and sweet —
Crushed by the limbs and breasts of love
Within that place where laurels meet
Amid the ocean-fronting grove.

Crushed by the limbs and breasts of love,
Ever it mounts from bygone days
Amid the ocean-fronting grove
Where summer comes but never stays.

Ever it mounts from bygone days,
The wild sweet memory we share,
Where summer comes but never stays,
Drunk with a philter-laden air,

The wild sweet memory we share!
Amid your fleece in some lost hour

Drunk with a philter-laden air,
The fragrant leaf and small white flower!

Sonnet (Green)



Green suns and suns of garnet I have known —
Turning, with suns that mock the sapphire-gem,
The constellated moons that mirror them
To ever-changing opals. On the flown
Horizons I have followed, all alone,
To meadows of mirage the deserts hem,
And sought to break the ghostly, golden stem
Of flowers of illusion, briefly blown
By evanescent waters. One by one,
The outward ways of wonder I have trod,
Through alien lives ineffable: But none
Hath held the troublous marvel and surprise
That gleams and trembles in thy slightest nod,
Or sleeps between thine eyelids and thine eyes.

Amor



This is the fire of Hestia's careful hearth;
The flame that fed on many-towered Troy;
Selene's light about the Latmian boy;
The all-consuming ardor of Melkarth.

This is the peregrine star that will return,
Faithful to the olden ephemerides;
The torch of corybantic mysteries;
The spark still burning in the stoppered urn.

This is the lamp ancestral hands have lit
Deep in the doorless crypts of blood and bone...
For you and me, it is a witch-fire blown

Where secret airs and obscure pinions flit,
That has outburned Walpurgis and the moon
And lifts in quenchless rose to a cloudy noon.

Twilight Song



O heart, be sad, be still!
She that we love is far,
Veiling her face with folded plain and hill
Below the vesper star.

Breathe only one wild sigh
On winds of sunset gone —
Flown like the exile, brief, October cry
Of oread and faun.

Mute evening wanes in mist...
Our feet have lost the way
Leading to that inviolable tryst
In dells of yesterday.

O night! upon thy stream
Obliviously to float
And haply find in westward-flowing dream
Her place and face remote.

Before Dawn



Bleak is the night and long
While slumber waits apart,
Refusing this lone heart,
These lips forlorn of song.

Deep is the night and slow
Whose gulf obscurely swarms
Mad, somber, faceless forms,
Blind masks of bale and woe.

The moon's late-risen ray
Through paling panes is shed...
From dreams uncomfited
I rouse before the day.

Now, ere the morning break,
Would that my head found rest
Upon thy halcyon breast
To sleep, and not to wake.

Amor Hesternalis



Our blood is swayed by sunken moons
And lulled by midnights long foredone;
We waken to a foundered sun
In Atlantean afternoons:
Our blood is swayed by sunken moons.

In gardens of another age,
For us, the Grecian roses fall,
The gold figs ripen by the wall;
And your pale breasts my love assuage —
In gardens of another age.

Our lot is with the lost and old:
We live, as in some fabulous
Fair idyl of Theocritus
Or tale by Heliodorus told —
Our home is with the lost and old.

Unmuted still, our pain abides,
Part of the lyre that Sappho smote,
And in the songs Catullus wrote
Our rapture and our grief resides.
Unmuted still, our pain abides.

A lamp in realms of night and death,
Our love reveals a tidal shore;

And still we follow, still implore
The sunken horns of Ashtoreth
In lands where all is night and death.

We are the specters of past years:
But soon Atlantis from the main
Shall lift; and Sappho bring again,
Risen from ancient brine and tears,
The Living Lesbos of past years.

Supplication



Be clement still, and steep
Thy breasts in mandragore,
And let thy hands a poppied vintage pour
Whenas we turn, idolatrous,
Fain of thy yielded bliss and given sleep
In nights calamitous.

Tender thou art, and kind:
Unto thy place we came
Through dolorous realms by roads of dust and flame:
Our eyes, in twilight sweetly lost,
Are shut like poppy-buds against the wind
From heavens of holocaust.

Before our feet depart,
With hemlock fill the cup
Our hands unto thy laden urn bold up;
With deadliest dwale bedew thy kiss
To leave a Stygian stillness in the heart
That begs no later bliss.

The Hill of Dionysus



This is enchanted ground
Whereto the nymphs are bound;
Where the hoar oaks maintain,
While seasons mount or wane,
Their ghostly satyrs, dim and undisped.
It is a place fulfilled and circled round
With fabled years and presences of Eld.

These things have been before,
And these are things forevermore to be;
And he and I and she,
Inseparate as of yore,
Are celebrants of some old mystery.

Under the warm blue skies
The flickering butterflies,
Dancing with their frail shadows, poise and pass.
Now, with the earth for board,
The bread is eaten and the wine is poured;
While she, the twice-adored,
Between us lies on the pale autumn grass.

Thus has she lain before,
And thus we two have watched her reverently;
More beautiful, and more
Mysterious for her body's nudity.

Full-burdened with the culminating year,
The heavens and earth are mute;
Till on a fitful wind we seem to hear
Some fainting murmur of a broken flute.
Adown the hillside steep and sere
The laurels bear their ancient leaves and fruit.

These things have happened even thus of yore,
These things are part of all futurity;
And she and I and he,
Returning as before,
Participate in some unfinished mystery.

Her hair, between my shoulder and the sun,
Is turned to iridescent fire and gold:
A witch's web, whereon
Wild memories are spun,
And magical delight and sleep unfold
Beyond the world where Anteros is lord.

It is the hour of mystical accord,
Of respite, and release
From all that hampers us, from all that frets,
And from the vanity of all regrets.
where grape and laurel twine,
One more we drink the Dionysian wine,
Ringed with the last horizon that is Greece.

Nocturne: Grant Avenue



The city's towers were limned in fire
When, down the long, the hill-descending street,
We rode as down some cataract of stars:
Our hearts replete
With that rebirth of wonder and desire,
We seemed to overpass the night's effulgent bars.

Quoting those lines of Baudelaire
On what delight the Town's old lovers seek,
I saw your face by subtler dreams illumed,
And heard you speak
Of how, amid that multifold parterre,
Beauty and mystery and evil softly bloomed.

Through us, in throbbing unison,
Strange pulses ran and secret powers thrilled
From all the thronging darkness hazardous:
We twain were one
As in remembered noons by rapture stilled
When all the forest fountains sang unheard of us.

And yet... how far from Arcady
And from the shores and dales of sylvan love!...
And yet... what ghostly train of nymph and Pan,
Goddess and dove,

Through the walled mazes followed you and me
From out that halcyon world in which our love began;

And, through the city's glare and sound,
What ghosts of faint hesternal flowers blew
And freshness home from woodlands far away:
Until, anew,
At parting in your long, deep kiss I found
The savor of sweet balm and spiced immortal bay.

Future Pastoral



Dearest, today I found
A lonely spot, such as we two have loved,
Where two might lie upon Favonian ground
Peering to faint horizons far-removed:

A green and gentle fell
That steepens to a rugged canyon's rim,
Where voices of vague waters fall and swell
And pines far down in sky-blue dimness swim.

Toward the sunset lands,
A leafless tree, from tender slopes of spring,
Holds out its empty boughs like empty hands
That vainly seek some distance-hidden thing.

Strange, that my wandering feet,
In all the years, had never known this place,
Where beauty, with a glamor wild and sweet,
Awaits the final witchcraft of your face.

Upon this secret hill
I gave my dark bereavement to the sun,
My sorrow to the flowing air... until
Your tresses and the grass were somehow one,

And in my prescient dream I seemed to find
An unborn joy, a future memory

Of you, and love, and sunlight and the wind
On the same grass, beneath the selfsame tree.

Postlude



Hearkening now the voices of the crowd,
Have you forgot the faint Parnassian music
We heard between the bracken and the cloud?

What have you found amid the many faces?
Nothing remains for me, save the spent echoes
Of words we said in falcon-hovered places.

O tryst too long delayed, too long denied!
I meet on changing paths a faceless phantom
Exile and chill as wisps of eventide.

Empty the forest now, empty the stream;
Your naked body on the noonlit hill
Has gone with the cloudy lovers lost in dream.

Midnight Beach



In starlight, by the ghostly sea,
We ran, we loitered, hand in hand,
Along the lone, unending strand;
Where, flowing in the surf-wet sand,
The wan stars raced or paused as we.

Aloof we seemed, from time and change,
Like runes a magian might unroll
Upon some old unfading scroll,
Or phantoms loosed from earthly dole
In starry freedom, lone and strange.

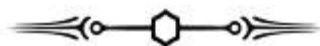
Some great, unspoken gramarie
Had exorcised that incubus,
The world, that fell away from us...
Reborn, and dear, and perilous,
The past arose beside the sea.

Returning in that mystic hour,
Above us hovered many a night
That had your eyes alone for light:
Full-petaled, past all worldly blight,
Love bloomed an amaranthine flower.

In starlight, by the ghostly sea,
I caught and kissed you as of yore;

We ran, we tarried, as before;
Where, flowing on the surf-wet shore,
The wan stars raced or paused as we.

Illumination



Musing upon the mysteries of the flesh,
I am as some hierophant of old
For whom the temple's hidden valves unfold.
Remembering now your tresses' heavy mesh
A little harsh beneath my pillowed face;
The savor of your bosom and the scent;
Your warmth, a blissful essence immanent,
Flooding my veins in the long unstirred embrace;

Your eyes, beheld so close their glory seemed
One strange great orb; your laughter's gentle fall: —
Remembering these, I know the mystical
Round lotos ripening, locked in garths of night,
And sighing of those live fountains that have streamed
In Edens of a seven-sensed delight.

Omniety



I am the master of strange spells
Whereby the past is made tomorrow,
And April blows in fields long fallow,
And Dis unseals Hyblaeon wells.

From out the house of incarnation
I pass with ether or with air,
In climes and times of otherwhere
Resume my destiny and station.

Loosed from the coils of space and number,
I am the shadowy self who stands
Kissing your lips, holding your hands,
Warding your labor and your slumber.

Dream not to escape me, day or night,
Even in the passionate arms of others,
For I am one with all your lovers,
Sharing their pain and their delight.

Sea Cycle



Below the duff, before the granite stair,
The foam-crests curl and feather in blue air,
Numberless as the helmet-plumes of hosts
Resurgent from millenium-foundered coasts.
The billows, wreathed with sea-weed and sea-flower,
Mount landward from the mermaid's plundered bower,
And shells and pebbles, torn from sunken strands,
Shift idly on the rainbow-haunted sands.
The slow tide stirs, amid the nether main,
The sluggish treasure-galleons of Spain;
And surely, if we wait and watch awhile,
The spars of galleys cast on the Sirens' isle,
Or broken on Saturnia's iron keys,
Will swirl before us from the cyclic seas...

Dear, shall I pray the gulf's great deity,
Nodens, to bring once more for you and me
Some love-relinquished hour we could not save
That westered all too swiftly to the wave,
Ebbing between the cypress and the grass?
Though prayer be vain, this thing shall come to pass,
For still the solemn cycles wane and flow,
Bringing again the lost and long ago.
All that the sea has taken, the sea restores:
Somehow, somewhere, on ocean-winnowed shores,

Again we two shall wander, and shall not stay,
Finding the golden wrack of yesterday.

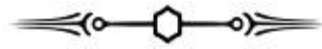
Poems in Prose (1965)



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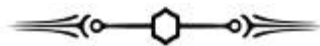
The Crystals



RAPTLY AS ONE who would divine the perilous eyes of Sleep, and the dreams and mysteries which lurk therein, I sought to fathom the gulf-enclosing orb of the crystal: Void for a time, and hollow with light it was, and transpicuous like the orient sky that is made clear for the colours of the dawn. But soon the light was centered to a star, and the crystal itself, as if pregnant with the Infinite, became a tenebrous and profound abysm, thro which a teeming myriad of shadows, vague as incipient dreams, or luminous with a glimpse of vision not prefigurible, fled in an ever-changing phantasmagoric succession about the star: From out those vortical and swirling glooms, where only the central star was constant, I saw the pallor of innominable faces emerge-faces that broke like bubbles; and forms that were strange as conceptions of an alien sun, with the eidolons of things which were imageless before, swam for a little in that phantasmic wave. But all the multifold mysteries which were manifest therein, I knew for the hidden thoughts and occlude, reluctant dreams of mine under-soul — thoughts and dreams now shadow-shown in the gulf-revealing orb of the hollow crystal...

Thus, in the crystal of Time and Space, whose gulfs contain all that we call the Infinite, may God behold the manifestation of all the multiform mysteries, and all the secret thoughts and dreams which abide in the centermost sanctuary of His Being. And naught may appear to Him but these-His thoughts and dreams forever shadow-shown in the immeasurable orb of the hollow crystal of Time and Space.

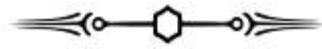
The Muse of Hyperborea



TOO FAR AWAY is her wan and mortal face, and too remote are the snows of her lethal breast, for mine eyes to behold them ever. But at whiles her whisper comes to me, like a chill unearthly wind that is faint from traversing the gulfs between the worlds, and has flown over ultimate horizons of ice-bound deserts. And she speaks to me in a tongue I have never heard but have always known; and she tells of deathly things and of things beautiful beyond the ecstatic desires of love. Her speech is not of good or evil, nor of anything that is desired or conceived or believed by the termites of earth; and the air she breathes, and the lands wherein she roams, would blast like the utter cold of sidereal space; and her eyes would blind the vision of men like suns; and her kiss, if one should ever attain it, would wither and slay like the kiss of lightning.

But, hearing her far, infrequent whisper, I behold a vision of vast auroras, on continents that are wider than the world, and seas too great for the enterprise of human keels. And at times I stammer forth the strange tidings that she brings: though none will welcome them, and none will believe or listen. And in some dawn of the desperate years, I shall go forth and follow where she calls, to seek the high and beatific doom of her snow-pale distances, to perish amid her indeseccrate horizons.

The Lotus and the Moon



I STOOD WITH my beloved in the lotus pool, when the moon was round as the great ivory breast of a Titaness, and the flowers were full-blown and pale upon the water.

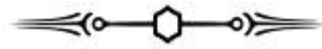
And I said to my beloved: "I would that thou shouldst love me well tonight. For never again shall there be a night like this, with the meeting of thee and me by this selfsame ripe and rounded moon, by this pool with flowers blown but not overblown."

But she demurred, and was perverse, and loved me not as I would that she should love me.

And after several nights, we stood again by the lotus pool, when the moon was hollow as an ageing breast, and the petals of the flowers had fallen apart on the water.

And now my beloved was faint to love me well, and all was well between us. But in my heart I mourned for that other night, when the moon was round as the great ivory breast of a Titaness, and the flowers were full-blown and pale upon the water.

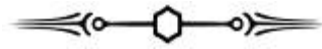
To the Daemon



TELL ME MANY tales, O benign maleficent daemon, but tell me none that I have ever heard or have even dreamt of otherwise than obscurely or infrequently. Nay, tell me not of anything that lies between the bourns of time or the limits of space: for I am a little weary of all recorded years and charted lands; and the isles that are westward of Cathay, and the sunset realms of Ind, are not remote enough to be made the abiding-place of my conceptions; and Atlantis is over-new for my thoughts to sojourn there, and Mu itself has gazed upon the sun in aeons that are too recent,

Tell me many tales, but let them be of things that are past the lore of legend and of which there are no myths in our world or any world adjoining. Tell me, if you will, of the years when the moon was young, with siren-rippled seas and mountains that were zoned with flowers from base to summit; tell me of the planets gray with eld, of the worlds whereon no mortal astronomer has ever looked, and whose mystic heavens and horizons have given pause to visionaries. Tell me of the vaster blossoms within whose cradling chalices a woman could sleep; of the seas of fire that beat on strands of ever-during ice; of perfumes that can give eternal slumber in a breath; of eyeless titans that dwell in Uranus, and beings that wander in the green light of the twin suns of azure and orange. Tell me tales of inconceivable fear and unimaginable love, in orbs whereto our sun is a nameless star, or unto which its rays have never reached.

The Forbidden Forest



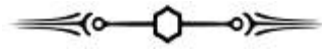
THE CHILD NATHA lived with his father and mother in a little house not far from the verge of the great jungle. Every day he could see the ancient trees that were taller than ebony or mahogany, and the gleaming of enormous orchids upon their matted creepers. His parents had told him that he must never venture within the jungle, for the beauty of the high palms and hanging flowers concealed a host of dreadful perils, and venomous serpents and dire monsters dwelt among them. But Natha thought that nothing in the world could be so beautiful as the jungle; and it lured him evermore with the mystery of its infinitude, with its manifold and silent and fantastic loveliness; and he dreamt that the flowers would be fairer still, and the trees more high and stately, if he could see them near at hand. And the child Natha grew to love the jungle with a strange and fearful love.

One day, when his parents had gone on a brief journey, and had given him many parting admonitions to avoid the perilous wood, Natha left the little house, and crossed the open fields in which he was permitted to play, and drew near to the forbidden forest. His tiny heart began to beat like a drum, when the monstrous palms and liana-laden trees loomed above him. But their shadows were so cool and green and deep, and he saw so many blossoms, so many fretted ferns and lovely-shapen leaves, and so many butterflies that vanished or emerged among them, and so many saffron and scarlet and azure birds that flew away with strange cries in the emerald gloom, that he soon lost all memory of his parents' warning, and wandered further and further, following the butterflies and the birds.

And Natha was very happy for a while, and he found a million things to puzzle or fascinate or please his childish mind; and he plucked many flowers, only to drop them when he found others that were larger or brighter. And he loved the rich, inebriating perfume of the flowers, and he loved their pale and amber and opalescent hues.

Now, after a time, Natha became tired, and he thought of his little home and his mother's care with a sudden longing. And he tried to retrace his way through the deep jungle; but he had wandered far in the emerald gloom, and all things were different and unfamiliar, and he could not find the route by which he had come. Instead, he soon lost himself among trees that were vaster and darker than any he had yet seen; and around him were pallid blossoms broad as moons, that poured forth a heavy wave of overpowering lethal fragrance. And Natha was a little frightened now; but as he wandered on, the scent of the flowers began to make him drowsy. And the trees grew darker and taller still, and the blossoms were huge and bright as rising suns, and he seemed to drown in their perfume as in a voluptuous tide. And Natha was no longer frightened when he fell among the blossoms; and their faces receded and faded above him as he sank down to everlasting sleep.

The Mithridate

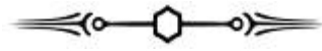


THE WORLD HAS a thousand poisons, thin or potent, honey-like or nauseous, quick or languid, corrosive and deadly, or captious and deceptive and narcotic. There are poisons bright as an amber wine, or rich as blood or rubies, or clear and hueless and innocent-seeming as the water of untroubled lakes, or dark and turbid as the ooze of the nether sea. There are poisons that slay the soul, that slay the heart or the mind or the body, and others that never slay, but only torture and benumb.

Against all these, your love is the sovereign mithridate; and indeed, I have never found any other.

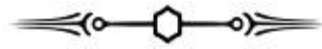
But when you love me not, or love me ill, I am powerless against them; and even love itself becomes an immedicable poison — a poison that is doubly lethal because it kills so slowly, or does not kill at all.

Narcissus



SPLENETIC, PALE NARCISSUS, in the green dead depth of some rotting pool: thou seest thine image drown and re-emmerge, beneath the shifting iridescence of corruption, the beautiful bright scum that damascenes with fantastic arabesques the fetid water. Or in the brazen mirrors, mottled with verdigris, of queens that were fair and fatal, avid and insatiate of love or pain in lands the desert has long obliterated, perchance thou viewest the implacable perverse nympholepsy of thy mien. Or in the rusting shield of some ancestral warrior, peering with a casual curiosity, thou findest thine eyes alone reflected in pools of clear steel amid the tarnish, and in them a spark that seems to have fallen from the perished flambeaux, a gleam from the brave and rutilating camp-fires whose ashes have fed the fertility of alien fields, sown and harvested a thousand times since the red autumn of the last, legendary battle.

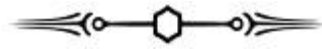
The Peril That Lurks Among Ruins



“GO NOT TOO often among ruins”, said the Demon, in one of his infrequent hours of admonitory confidence. “For there is a strangeness in the great and multitudinous shadows which these memorials of the immensity of the Past, broken tho they be, have thrown for so many centuries upon the selfsame spot as in the dawn of their erection. Bethink thee, such shadows have gathered an unwonted strength and intensity from their ancient, imperturbed brooding; and they are not as the shadows of natural objects, for human time has accumulated within them like unswept dust, and memories of the dead have come to cluster there like bats in a deep cavern. They have all the power and all the sopor of despair; they are deep as death and hollow as hell, the Earth has grown abysmal beneath them, and the circumcluded air is full of headlong and vertiginous gulfs: their dim recesses are alurk with the impalpable vampires of eclipsed magnificence and the ghostly incubi of immemorial might.”

“He is not wise who walks frequently within these hazardous shadows, and this is the peril, that, treading heedlessly, thou slip on some intangible precipice of the Past, and go falling irrecoverably and forevermore, among phantasmagoric eidola, and the ghostly and meaningless dead that thou be drawn to join the swirl of phantoms [sic], which sere and purposeless as blown autumnal leaves, go fleeing thro a windy and eternal night of past things; that, lost and unseen, thou whirl with spectral memories and the gusty sand, thro shattered arches and between domeless columns, that thou abide with shadows, apart from the future and all its change, in the vast, irremeable limbo of forespent and pofitless time.”

The Abomination of Desolation



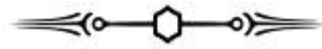
THE DESERT OF Soom is said to lie at the world's unchartable extreme, between the lands that are little known and those that are scarcely even conjectured. It is dreaded by travellers, for its bare and ever-moving sands are without oases, and a strange horror is rumored to dwell among them. Of this horror, many tales are told, and nearly all of the tales are different. Some say that the thing has neither visible form nor audible voice, and others that it is a dire chimera with multitudinous heads and horns and tails, and a tongue whose sound is like the tolling of bells in deep funereal vaults. Of the caravans and solitary wanderers who have ventured amid the sands of Soom, none has returned without a story to tell; and some have never returned at all, or have come back with brains devoured to madness by the terror and vertigo and delirium of infinite empty space.

..Yes, there are many tales, of a thing that follows furtively or with the pandemonium of a thousand devils, of a thing that roars or whispers balefully from the sand or from the wind, or stirs unseen in the coiling silence; or falls from the heavens like a crushing incubus: or yawns like a sudden pit before the feet of the traveller...

But once on a time there were two lovers who came to the desert of Soom, and who had occasion to cross the sterile sands. They knew not the evil rumor of the place; and, since they had found an abiding Eden in each other's eyes, it is doubtful if they even knew that they were passing through a desert. And they alone, of all who have dared this fearsome desolation, have had no tale to relate of any troublous thing, of any horror that followed or lurked before them, either seen or unseen, audible or heard; and for them

there was no chimera, no yawning pit nor incubus. And never, never could they comprehend the stories that were told by less fortunate wayfarers.

The Touch-Stone

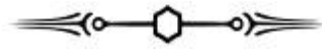


NASIPHRA THE PHILOSOPHER had sought through many years and in many lands for the fabled touch-stone, which was said to reveal the true nature of all things. He had found all manner of stones, from the single boulders that have been carved into the pyramids of monarchs, to the tiny gems that are visible only through a magnifying-glass, but since none of them had effected any change or manifest alteration in the materials with which they were brought in contact, Nasiphra knew that they were not the thing he desired. But the real existence of a touch-stone had been affirmed by all the ancient writers and thinkers, and so, he was loath to abandon his quest, in spite of the appalling number of mineral substances which had been proven to lack the requisite qualities,

One day Nasiphra saw a large oval pebble lying in the gutter, and picked it up through force of habit, though he had no idea that it could be the touch-stone. Its color was an ordinary grey, and the form was no less commonplace than the color. But when Nasiphra took the pebble in his hand, he was startled out of his philosophic calm by the curious results: the fingers that held the pebble had suddenly become those of a skeleton, gleaming white and thin and fleshless in the sunlight; and Nasiphra knew by this token that he had found the touch-stone. He proceeded to make many tests of its odd properties, all with truly singular results; it revealed to him the fact that his house was a mouldy sepulchre, that his library was a collection of worm eaten rubbish, that his friends were skeletons, mummies, jackdaws and hyenas, that his wife was a cheap and meretricious trull, that the city in which he lived was an ant-heap, and the world itself a gulf of

shadow and emptiness. In truth there was no limit to the disconcerting and terrible disclosures that were made by this ordinary-looking pebble. So after a time, Nasiphra threw it away, preferring to share with other men the common illusions, the friendly and benign mirages that made our existence possible.

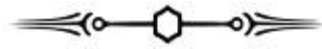
The Image of Bronze and the Image of Iron



IN THE TEMPLE of the city of Morm, which lies between the desert and the sea, are two images of the god Amanon,- a bronze image facing an iron image, across the fires and blood-stains of the altar-stone. When the gory sunset of the day of sacrifice is over and the writhing fires of the sacrifice are dead, and the moon smiles with a cold and marble smile on the blackened altar-then Amanon speaks to Amanon, with a voice of iron, and a voice of bronze... Thus, and nor otherwise, the image of iron speaks to the image of bronze:

“Brother, when the censers which are wrought of single sapphires and rubies, had turned the air to a blue mist of perfume, and the red serpents of the fire were fed on the heart of the sacrifice. I dreamed a strange dream: Methought, in some far day,-a day as yet unprophecied of the stars, the temple and the city of Morm, the people thereof, and we, the images of its god, were one with the sand of the desert, and the sand of the sea: Stone was fallen from stone, atom parted from atom, in the corruption of rain, and wind, and sun, Lichens,- and the desert grass, had eaten the temple to its plinth, and the cold, slow fire of rust and verdigris, crawling from mouth to nostrils, from knees to throat, had left of us twain a little pile of red and green dust. The roots of a cactus clove the altar-stone, and the shadow of the cactus, like the uncouth finger of some fantastic dial, crawled thereon thru days of blue fire, and nights of sultry sulphurous moonlight. Blown thru the lonely market-place, the wind of the desert offered the dust of kings to the wind of the sea.”

The Corpse and the Skeleton



SCENE: THE CATACOMBS of the ancient city of Oomal. A new corpse has been deposited along-side a skeleton, which, from its mouldiness and worm-picked appearance, seems of considerable antiquity.

The Corpse: How now, old bare-bones! What word of the worm? Methinks you have known him well, in your time.

The Skeleton: Aye, aye, and so will you: 'Tis a world of creditors, of which the tomb and the worm are the last. There is little left for the devil, when these have taken their due account. The vermin is a very Jew, and will have his last ounce of brain and marrow. 'Has spared me never a scrap of flesh nor tatter of skin against the mouldy breath of the cavern-wind, nor aught save the jaw-bone to stop the diddering of my teeth.

The Corpse: You speak so dismally: To change the theme, let us talk of our former lives.

The Skeleton: Willingly, willingly, though as for myself, I fear my memories have grown a trifle musty, from five hundred years, more or less, in an air that is rotten with the dead. However, for the dust that has settled among the bones of my throat, I bethink me that I was once a taverner, and, for capacity, was not a least of mine own puncheons. Often-sith have I thirsted for even a quart, in lieu of those former tunfuls. Time is a cheating merchant, he has given me this modicum of mould, in exchange for a noble corporosity. Death, you will find, is a dull business, and without profit despite the number of the traffickers.

The Corpse: Where, then, with their multiform splendours, are the heavens of light and hells of fire, promised unto faith by the sybils and hierophants?

The Skeleton: Ask of yonder cadaver, him whose corpulence diminishes momentarily, for the pampering of worms. He was once a priest, and spoke authentically of these matters, with all the delegated thunder of gods. As for myself, I have found nothing beyond this narrow charnel vault, in whose lethal night are bred the vapours of pestilence, that wander forth to swell our number with the living, and rise from the rotten earth for an incense to the very sun.

The Corpse: 'Twas the pestilence that sent me here from my marriage-bed. I was an optimate of Oomal, yet they have thrust me away to rot among the common rogues.

The Skeleton (Sympathetically, and in a tone less like the grating of bones than heretofore): Too bad, too bad! Albeit I am long beyond the flesh myself I commiserate you. The brides are bony, and the bedfellows cold, that you are like to find here, even though you lie till the death-light glimmers within your eye-sockets for the sparkling of lust.

The Corpse: Find we then, no recompense, no meed of wisdom holden unto Death, nor the secrets buried from the sun, in the deep night of charnals?

The Skeleton: We have wisdom, if you like-a dull and dusty wisdom, and I would give it all for a good draught of Chian wine. Perchance 'tis something to know that bodies are made of dust and water, the last of which is evaporable, and the former capable of dissolvment. For this is all our knowledge, in spite of much that is known and spoken of hierophant and

philosopher. However, unlike the lore and wisdom of these, it can be contained without discommodation by one skull.

The Sun and the Sepulchre



I SAW THE declivous latter sunlight fall and glitter upon the sepulchre of one whose immomentous name was holden awhile from Oblivion by the deeply-trenched remembrance of marble. And, touched ere-long by the richer fires of the horizon-cloven and ensanguined orb, those cold, marmoreal pallors blushed with a fervent blazonry of roseal-tinted splendour.

Even thus, even thus, and not otherwise, O Sun, shall thine after-fire transglorify the zoning snows and glaciers of a planet that has become the eviternal tomb of its temporal race. And thus thy latter setting, vast with the marvel of strange light and imagineless flame, shall inform those bleak and spherel pallors with a fervant blazonry of roseal-tinted splendour.

Selected Poems (1971)



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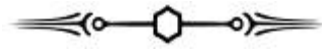
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The Pursuer



Climbing from out what nadir-fountained sea,
From nether incarnations none may sound —
Sealed with the night of suns, forever bound
With frozen systems — comest thou to me,
Despair, whose darker name in memory
I know not, bringing from the dead profound,
With cerernents and sepulchral purples wound,
The foulness of thine immortality?

O shape of loathlier horrors, here untold,
Have I not climbed secure from their abyss,
Those lower spheres, those limbos dire and old ?
Thou tearest me beyond the hells of this,
Down chasms dreadful for the light of tears
Where worm-like terror crawls in the undead years !

The City of the Titans



I saw a city in a lonely land:
Foursquare, it fronted upon gulfs of fire;
Behind, the night of Erebus hung entire;
And deserts gloomed or glimmered on each hand.

Sunken it seemed, past any star or sun,
Yet strong with bastion, proud with tower and dome:
An archetypal, Titan-built Rome,
Dread, thunder-named, the seat of gods foredone.

Outreaching time, beyond destruction based,
Immensely piled upon the prostrate waste
And cinctured with insuperable deeps,

The city dreamed in darkness evermore,
Pregnant with crypts of terrible strange lore
And doom-fraught arsenals in lampless keeps.

In the Wind



Lo, in the wind what legions pass,
Phantom, innumerable, fleet;
Watching, I dream their pauseless feet
These lights that run upon the grass.

Fire of Snow

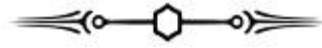


Pale fire of snow had lit the dusk for me:
Astray with mind half-consciously intent
I had not thought the wood so imminent —
Pregnant with pine and sombre cypress-tree.
Darker than sleep, and mute with mystery
Like far-off death, where questing dreams are spent,
Their winding caverns deepened as I went
Therein, and paused in old expectancy.

Pale fire of snow had lit the dusk for me...
But the black stillness held where once the wind
Had parted boughs in music, that the gleam
Of stars might enter; all was strangely blind,
Like midnight thickening 'neath the middle sea —
Filled with the silence of a time-slain dream.

To Beauty

A Fragment



Beauty, whose all-potential hand
Forever holds the fertile stars in fee,
What aeons serve thine empery,
What deeps are vast to thy demand !
All which Immensity,
Furrowed by fire, and sown by laboring suns
Hath brought to fruit within the patient past,
In heritage thou hast;
And all the flaming promise of the spheres
Which in remoter years
Shall be fulfilled at last
After the toil of long aphelions.
The advancing heavens still advance
Thy sun-supported feet;
From out the gulfs of divagance
Stars on thine errands meet;
Who bruit thy briefest word
In cyclic thunders heard
By gods upon their echo-shaken throne;
Who fledge thy light
With ever-travelling light
To constellate the eyeless night unknown.

Decadence



By some strange antepast I have consumed
In a former star foregone the fruits of this;
And frost and dust commingle in the kiss
Of love, with my forsaken self entombed.

Quenched as of night and Lethe, the great fire
Wherewith to lordlier suns my spirit burned,
Bequeathes but ashes, long and long inurned,
To feed the darkling altars of desire.

O soul not all the further stars might fill,
Nor any god constrain your stubborn will
Nor silence this your mouth with heaven's wine.

How wearily, how humbly shall you crave
From the low Earth an everlasting grave,
And from the dust its ancient anodyne !

In the Desert



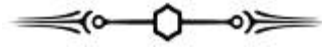
I met the night in unfamiliar lands,
In realmless desolations, drear and far,
Where no life was, nor any shard remained
Of tomb or cenotaph: all salient things
Long since had fed the prone monotony
Of the null forgetful sands. Here darkness came
Directly as a king who mounts the throne
Of some Cimmerian primogeniture.
A waif of day, I wandered beneath stars
That seemed the unnumbered steely eyes of Death
Seeking the lost necropoles.

A wind
Rose loudly on the middle night, and passed,
Laden with nameless, immemorial dust,
The shapeless ghost of empires. In that dark
Alien and secret as the heart of death,
I knew not if the wind, remembering
Walls that were great upon its ancient way,
Sang now their threnody, or if the dust,
Tongueless itself, found in the shrilling wind
A tongue for its regret. I, wandering there,
Felt but the dust's unseen, mysterious kiss,
Heard but the grievous wind... So have I known
Lost visions vaguely grasp at memory

And fall back unrecalled... Then, laden still
With sorrow and with dustiness of Eld,
Stirring the desert dark, the wind went on
To leave its dwindling burden at the feet
Of splendid morning unendurable.

Somnus

A Fragment



The bottom-lands of Lethe and of Night:
Beyond the fiery troubling of the stars,
The peaceful heavens hold in plenitude
A gloom that lies like drift of purple down
On lids oblivious — having but for light
The glimmer as of some lost afterglow.
Which, irretrievable of any sun,
Seems evermore to falter and to grope
‘Mid forms and shades elusive. Like a scene
To one entranced with dark mandragora,
And dimmer than mirages of the moon,
Lies all the drowsy land, lapsing away
With Lethe to the sleep of nadir plains...

Dolor of Dreams



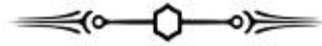
The shadow of a sorrow haunts the light,
And sense of dreamt, forgotten tragedy —
Surviving phantom of a memory
Slain by the dawn with shades of yesternight.

Like the blue pallor of the daylight moon,
Most clearly seen within the enshadowed stream,
The wan waste face of some dead, tragic dream
Peers from the twilight places of the noon.

Till, half-bemazed, I am as one who stands
Upon the summit of a misty hill,
And hears remote, one moment loud or still,
The dolor in the bells of blinded lands.

The City of Destruction

I



THE CITY IS surrounded with ramparts like a mountain-range — walls of such magnitude that it seems no power save that of an earthquake could have heaved them into place; and is rent with the chasms of tremendous streets, in which the winds of chaos lose themselves. The scope of spherulic roof and walls subverts the wandering air; and the unstarred zenith is hung with the [black and] swollen menace of its mighty domes. Eternity is citadelled within its walls that fortify the very gulfs — infernal walls on which the watchfires are like a crown of fallen stars. The groaning planes of the nadir are oppressed by the burden of the city's multitudinous crags and pinnacles, and are shaken momentarily by the earthquake-begetting labor of the tempest-imprisoning machineries of doom, and of engines in whose vitals the four elements are allied in a brotherhood of toil tremendous to the foundations of the suns — a labor that makes the planets pale. The palpitation of the city's death-laden pulse penetrates with obscure tremors the blind and deaf spaces of the nether skies, unexplored by the traveling ray of a star.

II

In the cavern-like halls of palaces built of black and mountainous adamant quarried from out the central gloom of glacier-conquered suns, the demonian lords of doom sit in council by the light of smoldering lamps that are red as the moons of hell. The Titan sons of night, whose forms are shadow-vested from head to foot, and from under whose murky and

precipitous brows the eyes glare out with the lurid splendour of infernal fires betrayed by secret caves. With their eyes, which search the abyss, and all the special coverts of the night, they ponder the charts of infinity, and the pells and scrolls which hold the immemorial history of suns and worlds, and all the prophecies and decrees, and dooms and ultimates of Time. They study the holocryptic volumes which contain the laws and secrets of Eternity, and the terms and reigns and genealogies of gods and demons. Therein are inscribed the spells which have power upon the supreme unspeakable God, and the times and conditions of His birth and death. And therein is the black knowledge mined from the nadir, and the law of the powers of the...

To the Daemon of Sublimity



I wane and weary: come, thou swifter One,
With vans of ether-sundering instancy,
Zoned with essential night and sovereignty
Of flame septuple, strong to blind or stun
Beyond the bolted levin. Though Earth, undone,
Fail to thy meteor-fraught epiphany,
Though Time be as a chasm-riven sea,
Come thou, and bear me to thy chosen sun.

Yea, in the fiery fastness of the star
That thine empyreal wings most often find,
Thy lordliest eyrie, lone in gulf and gloom,
Leave me and lose me, safe from wasting war
Of finite things unworthy, and resigned
To some apotheosis of bright doom.

Nevermore



Ah, let me not remember
The leaves of brown November
‘Neath boughs renewed with May;
Let me forget the flowers
Of blown Aprilian bowers,
When autumn shades and showers
Besiege the flowerless day.

Ah, never, nevermore,
Beauty that burned of yore
As a great lamp of gold,
Must I recall thy grace,
Nor dream thy phantom face
In any lonely place
The moonless mists enfold.

The Incubus of Time



Ill days and dolorous nights and years accurst —
The increase of evil, that is twin to life;
Weariness of re-animated strife,
And love, renewing with the selfsame thirst
The same delight — a drunken Tantalus;
And the thousand-chorded monotones of pain
Irresolubly played and played again
On broken souls and bodies ruinous.

I would the world and all its leaden woe,
Its ennui, like incumbent tombs of stone,
And time's each minute, as an iron clod,
Were bound about the monstrous throat of God,
And He were drawn in deathless overthrow
To some blind nadir of the voids unknown.

Nocturne



A silver sleep is on the vale;
The breathless pines are pale,
Where quiet shadows dream
By some departing stream.

With hands fantastical and still,
Upon the windless hill,
One cypress fain would hold
The moon of faded gold.

Metaphor



You are the stately sunset,
Departing with a hundred flames of amber
Beyond the pinnacles of autumn pine
And the low mountains
That bear the brief and vast Olympus of the clouds
Under a purpling zenith.
You are the stately sunset,
And after you
Silence will rear the moon-eclipsing night,
And a few spectral stars will gather,
Like wisps to lead the wandering gods astray
Into the black and boundless fen of all the gulfs.

Sea-Memory



Since I have seen the refluent glory of the sea,
My dreams are made of azure, emerald and gold:
Tumultuous topaz, flowing sapphire manifold,
Have turned my slumber to a deep and splendid sea.

My memories are vibrant gold, sonorous green :
My brain is like a palace built from chrysolite,
Were lines of long-resounding columns infinite
For ever glimmer through a twilight gold and green.

Amor Aeternalis



O Love, thou Judas of the martyred soul!
Thou pandar to the painted harlot, Life !
The rankest lies wherewith thy heart is rife
Too fulsomely illumine thy lips' red scroll,
Whereon is writ the secret of our dole,
Of mortal woes immortalized by thee,
And wisdom, through thine olden perfidy,
Drawn back to life from some Lethean shoal.

Away! I know the weariness and fever
Kisses compounded of the world's old dust
With fire that feeds the seventh hell for ever!
The grave shall keep a gentler couch than thine,
Though round my heart the roots of nettles twine,
Wreathed in the ancient attitude of lust.

Memorial



Thy mouth, whereof the worm was amorous,
Thy brows, whereon some waning moon had power,
Thy breasts, corruptible as any flower,
And all thy troubled beauty tremulous —

These, these, my careful love hath laid away,
And in the tomb its marble dreams have made,
Thou sleepest, by no dawn or noon betrayed
To the cold light of time's corrosive day.

Yes, till my brain and all the dreams thereof,
And mournful memories, are bitter mould,
Thou liest, lovelier with death and love,

Than any queen ensepulchered of old,
Whose balmy ceremonies, with a soft perfume,
Make sweet for aye the mausolean gloom.

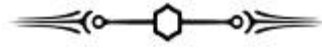
The Horologe



O clock, thy long and solemn tones,
That now resound the knell of time,
Are like some hammer's iron chime
That rings on broken tombs and thrones.

The Last Goddess

A Fragment



To laud the loves of old,
I sought for splendors fabulous and far:
The curls of one were black Circean petals
Of poppies blown by night
In the sad gardens of a sinful star;
Her eyes were mystic metals,
Wrought with a secret told
By lost archangels in their flight
To women of the worlds that stray
On the red verges of the nether day;
Her voice was like a lulling music blown
At sunset from an isle of spells
Across a lake of rosy nenuphar;
And yet therein
Betimes I caught the chill and crystal bells
That grieved, and grieved alone,
Above the fallen din
Of cities drowsed with revelry and sin.

The Flight of Azrael



SCENE: AN IMMENSE and darkling plain, remotely lit by the sunset of the last day. Two demons, passing from the interstellar deep, have paused on an isolated hill-top.

FIRST DEMON

What world is this, all desolate and dim
Under the lone, phantasmagoric heavens
Great with the hanging night? Yon luminance
Is lurid as the Furnace-glare of hell,
Seen from the contiguity of gloom
Of a Cimmerian region. All the air
Flags heavily, as beneath the weight of wings
Invisible and evil-from the plain
No movement, save of shadows mustering
Behind the heels of day.

SECOND DEMON

It is the Earth,
A hoary planet, old in wrath and woe
As any hell. Red pestilence and war
Have now refunded to the usuring wind
The breath of all its peoples; Azrael,
Delivering now the town and necropole
To one decay in night's abysmal vault,

Prepares him for departure. From afar,
Seest thou not the towering of his wings,
Like thunder on the sunset? Widening,
Those vans involve and stifle half the light
With bat-like folds and ribs: on the further stars,
Or worlds unknown of the outer infinite,
He now intends the darkness of his course;
On Algol's planets haply poised, he will
Make permanent the sable sun's eclipse,
Or round some vast Antarean satellite
His shadowed arc will broaden to a sphere,
Oblivion's black and perfect globe... On Earth
He comes no more: the very worms have died
In the scarce-nibbled carrion; the thin wind
Will write man's epitaph in shifting sand,
And the pale unfading arabesques of frost
Adorn and fret his ghoul-forgotten tomb.

That Last infirmity



Fame is the passing of a fitful wind —
A shouting of the tempest, and the sigh
That lingers in the sunset-ending sky,
To stillness and the alien stars resigned.

Lemurienne



From dawn to dawn your eyes of graven spar
For ever change, with chill, forgotten runes:
But all the while your spirit lies afar,
A sphinx that peers on prediluvian moons.

Dissidence



Within your voice the palms of Eden sigh
In scented winds blown from the summer foam;
But in your gaze the lulling hills of home
Accept the silence of an autumn sky.

Sestet



I have no heart to give you: long ago
Exceeding love has found and left me blind
To lesser loves. You are no more to me
Than some chance tavern with its doors aglow,
Proffering warmth and hospitality
On a strange road beset with night and wind.

Change



For pity, not for love
(Because you loved me so)
With undesirous lips
I kissed you long ago.

You were not over-fair;
And surely it is strange
Your memory should return,
Touched with this fairer change.

For now at whiles I meet
In eyes of weariness
Your sweetly watchful eyes
That know my still distress;

And turn to feel your lips
Laid soothly on my hair-
Your half-forgotten lips,
Grown strangely dear and fair.

Who knows?-if you should come
This shifting heart to prove,
Yours might the pity be,
And mine the pitied love.

On the Canyon-Side



Forgotten lies the world we knew,
One mile behind the looming hill;
And here, beside a laurel-darkened rill,
Slow-wandering, we have found
A fern-lost boulder large enough for two
That sit with arms enwound.

Upon your pale, delicious throat
Like a torn lace the shadows stir;
While, with a sharpened longing, I defer
The kiss that fain would fall;
And softly touch your yielded wrist, and note
How loud your pulses call.

Syringa-blossoms, frail and old,
Swept by the swiftly dying air,
Fall like a fragrant snow, and in your hair
Two poising petals rest;
And a great moth with wings of mottled gold
Pauses before your breast.

Now, while the world is far and dim,
Now, while the afternoon is new,
Reveal, I pray, the rapture that is you:
Hoard not the least caress,

Nor the last whiteness of the breast and limb,
From love made fetterless.

Song (Vagrant)



Vagrant from the realms of rose,
Love has flown where no man knows:
Though your fleetest witch should bind
With her hair the April wind,
Love is still to seek and find.

Though your eldest necromant
Raise again with solemn chant
All the ghostly girls of yore,
Crowned with blossoms thin and frore,
Vagrant love returns no more.

Though the sirens sing for him
On ulterior isles made dim
With the foam of ultimate seas,
All beyond the Hesperides,
Love shall pass unseen of these.

Though you find in fields of morn
Blossoms of their dews forlorn,
And the grieving grasses bent
By the latest way he went,
Errant still and discontent;

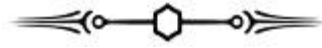
Though you seek from door to door
Through the city's wrath and roar;

Scan the phantom faces wan
Of the masquers mute with dawn —
Always love has come-and gone.

Though a lonely trail you tread,
Past the rim of autumn's red,
Ending on the moonlit snows —
Love has flown where no man knows,
Vagrant from the realms of rose.

The Sick Muse

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



Alas for thee, poor Muse! Thy caverned eyes at dawn
With visions from the baleful night are peopled still,
And I by turns behold, across thy pallor drawn,
Thy folly and thy horror, taciturn and chill.

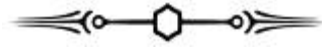
Have the rose goblin and the greenish succubus
Poured on thee fear and fearful passion from their urn?
Or has the Nightmare's arm, stubborn and tyrannous,
Too deeply drowned thee in some fabulous Minturne?

o Muse, I would an ancient freshness were exhaled
From out thy breast, whereon strong thoughts alone prevailed;
I would thy Christian blood, thy pulses wild or weak,

Ran like the numbered sound of syllables antique
In times when Phoebus, lord of song, in alternation
With Pan the harvest-lord maintained his domination.

The Death of Lovers

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



On couches filled with odors faint and failing,
Divans profound as tombs, we shall recline;
Around us, with strange languid petals paling,
The flowers that bloomed where ampler heavens shine.

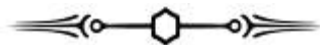
Our hearts, in their last love and ardor vying,
Shall flare to vast flambeaux before the end;
And in our souls' twin mirrors doubly dying,
Their soaring flames, reflected, shall descend.

Some eve of rose and mystic blue shall brighten;
One golden flash between us twain shall lighten
Like a long sigh fraught with departure's sorrow;

And the angel who unseals the sepulcher,
Joyous and faithful, shall relume tomorrow
The tarnished mirrors and the flames that were.

The Owls

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



In shelter of the vaulted yews,
Like alien gods who shun the world,
The flown owls wait with feathers furled,
Darting red eyes. They dream and muse.

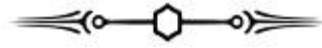
In rows unmoving they remain
Till the sad hour that they remember,
When, treading down the sun's last ember,
The towering night resumes its reign.

Their attitude will teach the seer
How wise, how needful is the fear
Of movement and of travailment:

For shadow-drunken wanderers bear
On all their ways the chastisement
Of having wished to wend elsewhere.

The Phantom

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



Like an ill angel tawny-eyed,
I will return, and stilly glide
With shadows of the lunar dusk
Into thy chamber aired with musk,

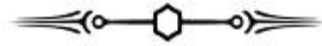
And I will give thee, ere I go,
The kisses of a moon of snow,
And long caresses, chill, unsleeping,
Of serpents on the marbles creeping.

When lifts again the bloodless dawn,
From out thy bed I shall be gone —
Where all, till eve, is void and drear:

Let others reign by love and ruth
Over thy life and all thy youth,
But I am fain to rule by fear.

Mists And Rains

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



Long ends of autumn, winters, springtimes drowned in mud,
Seasons of drowsiness! I love and laud you, fain
To fold your vaporous palls like Lethe round my brain
And seal in your vague sepulcher my soothèd blood.

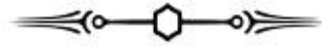
In the great wold where glacial winds are revelling,
Where wheels the weathervane through the delaying night,
Better than in soft April dawns, or summer's light,
My soul most amply will unfurl her raven wing.

To a heart replete with funeral memories numberless,
Whereon autumnal frosts have fallen from old time,
Naught is more sweet, O queenliest seasons of our clime,

Than the abiding train of your pale darknesses: —
Except it be some moonless eve of longings dead,
To ensumber all our grief upon a chanceful bed.

Sed Non Satiata

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



Strange goddess, with the hues that darkness gave to thee,
And the perfume of musk immingled with havana —
Black magic, made by some black Faust of the savannah —
Night-born enchantress, flanked with burnished ebony,

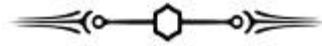
I choose, rather than eves of opium, faithfully,
Thy mouth where passion flaunts, raising a philtered urn;
When thee-ward my desires in caravan return,
Thine eyes become the cistern where my quenched ennui

Is quaffing... From those eyes, through which thy soul suspires,
Pitiless demon, pour me not such torrent fires!
My arms are not the Styx to embrace thee and to bear —

Alas! and never, O lewd Megara, is it mine
To break thy pride and put thee to the last despair,
In the hell of thy deep bed a deathless Proserpine

Spleen

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



When the low sky weighs oppressive like a coffin-cover
Upon the groaning spirit, prey to long ennui;
When all the horizons, and the charnel clouds that hover
Pour out a black day sadder than the darknesses;

When the earth is turned into a sodden prison-house
Where Hope, with futile fearful wing, time after time,
Beats on the dripping wall as might a flittermouse,
Or soars to meet the ceiling's rottenness and grime;

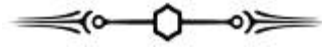
When like the bars of some great dungeon dolorous
Close down implacably the enormous grilles of rain;
When a silent race of sinister spiders infamous
Have spun their webs within the chambers of our brain; —

Then the bells leap in sudden rage from every steeple
And hurl to heaven a clamor frightful as the howling
Of some importunate, unfed demonian people
Who whine for blood and souls, above the city prowling;

— And the long hearses, with no music and no drums,
Defile with lentor through my mournful soul; Despair
Weeps, even as Hope, and dire, despotic Anguish comes
To hang her stifling sable draperies everywhere.

Anterior Life

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



Long since, I lived in lordly porches fronting
With thronged, enormous pillars to the tide,
Where day as in basaltic caverns died
With seaward gleams along the columns shunting.

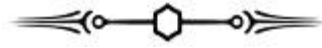
The surges rolled the reflex of the skies
Before my portals, mystically blending
Their consonance of solemn chords unending
With the nacre and rose ignited in mine eyes.

I lay supine through days with amber scented,
Blue-litten by the vast and vagrant wave,
Nursing a somber secret none could know:

On the full bosom of a golden slave
My feet reposed, and sable queens invented
Fantastic love to tease my weary woe.

Lethe (Cruel)

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



Cruel and deaf, come to my heart again,
O indolent sphinx, tigress that I adore!
Long, long my trembling fingers would explore
The dense and heavy darkness of thy mane;

And in thy skirts, a perfume-laden pall,
I would enshroud this ever-aching head,
The musty sweetness of my passion dead
Like faded flowers breathed amid the fall.

For I would sleep, rather than live, alas!
Doubtful as death that all-desired slumber
Where unremorseful kisses without number
Will cover thy beautiful body polished like brass.

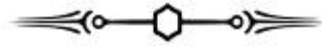
Unequalled in thy couch, that soft abyss,
To engulf the sighs and sobbings of my drouth;
Potent oblivion dwells upon thy mouth
And Lethe flows full-fountained in thy kiss.

To this my doom, a prisoner innocent,
The docile, destined martyr of desire,
I yield, and all my ardor fans the fire
And wrath of my undying punishment.

I will drink, to drown my rancor ere it start,
Hemlock benign and balms of sleep and rest
From the keen, delightful nipples of thy breast
That never held, nor will ever hold, a heart.

Beatrice

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



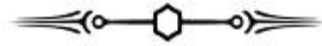
In a burnt land of ashes, verdureless and bare,
Loudly I made complaint to sun and soil and air,
And in my thoughts, as randomly I wandered on,
Whetted against my heart the dagger I had drawn;
Till at full noon I saw above my head descending
A great funereal cloud, pregnant with storm impending,
Wherefrom a flock of vicious demons craned at me
Like cruel, curious dwarves from some high balcony,
Considering me full coldly. Then, like passersby,
Who make rare sport of some poor madman they espy,
I heard them laugh and whisper, leaning each to each
With evil winks and signs obseener than their speech:

“At leisure contemplate this caricature grotesque,
This clown who turns the part of Hamlet to burlesque,
With wildly rolling eyes and locks upon the wind.
Verily, is it not most pitiful to find
This mendicant, this idle actor, this poor droll,
Who, having learned to play his one successful role,
In caterwauling thus his doleful songs, would dream
To win concern from eagle, cricket, flower and stream,
And even to us, who set such fashions long ago,
Would hoarsely howl his public monologues of woe?”

With pride that towered like the topmost mountains high
To quell the overswollen cloud, the demons' cry,
I would have turned my head, granting nor sign or word,
Had I not seen, midmost of all that filthy herd,
My queen with peerless eyes and bosom without fault.
O crime to shake the very sun from heaven's vault!
She laughed even as they, deriding my distress,
And gave them now and then some soiled, unclean caress.

The Voice

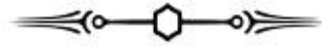
Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



MY CRADLE BACKED itself against the library, a somber Babel where myth and science and romance, the Latin cinders and Greek dust, were all commingled. I was tall as an infolio. Two voices spoke to me. One was insidious and emphatic, saying: "The Earth is a honeycomb full of sweetness, and I am able (thy pleasure in that case will be endless) to make for thee an appetite of sufficient capacity." And the other said to me: "Come, oh, come, to voyage into dreams, beyond all that is possible, beyond all that is known!" I answered: "Yes, sweet voice!" From that moment there dates the thing one might well call my curse and my fatality. Behind the decors of illimitable life, in the darkest gulfs of the abyss, I behold distinctly what singular worlds; and becoming the ecstatic victim of my own clairvoyance, I trail henceforward the hissing serpents that sting my heels. It is since that time that I, like the olden prophets, love so tenderly the desert and the sea; that I laugh at funerals and weep at feasts, and find a smooth savor in the bitterest wine; that I take often the most patent verities for lies, and with eyes upraised to heaven, stumble into pitfalls. But the Voice consoles me, saying: "Cherish thy dreams, for those of the sages are less beautiful than those of the fools and madmen."

The Poison

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



WINE CAN INVEST the must sordid hovel with a miraculous luxury, and can build many a fabulous portico in its red and golden vapors, like a sun setting in a cloudy heaven.

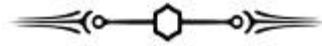
Opium can aggrandize the things that have no bourn, can lengthen illimitable, deepen time and voluptuousness, and fill the soul with dark and mournful pleasures beyond its capacity.

But these things are less than the poison flowing from thine eyes, from thy green eyes, those lakes whereat my soul trembles, seeing therein its own inverted image... My dreams for ever come in throngs quench their thirst at those gulfs of bitter emerald.

But these things are less than the dire prodigy of thy mordant saliva that plunges my soul into oblivion without remorse, and rolls it, falling and fainting, borne in a chariot of vertigo, to the very shores of Death!

The Two Kind Sisters

Translated from the French of Charles Pierre Baudelaire



DEATH AND DEBAUCH are two lovable girls, prodigal with kisses and rich in health, whose wombs, always virgin and clothed in rags, have never given birth amid all the eternal labor.

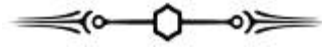
To the poet, that ill-paid courtier, that sinister enemy of families, the tombs and lupanars display beneath their bowers a bed that Remorse never frequented.

And the bier and the alcove, teeming with blasphemies, offer us turn, like two kind sisters, their terrible pleasures and their frightful comforts.

O Debauch, when wilt thou inter me in thine impure arms? O Death, when wilt thou come, her rival in all allurements, to graft thy black cypress upon her infected myrtles?

Moonlight (Your)

From Paul Verlaine



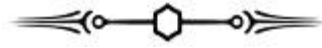
Your soul, it is a garden set apart,
Where masques and bergamasques go mummer-wise
And dance and strum the cithern, though at heart
Half-sad beneath their antical disguise.

Singing in minor mode, to muted string
Of love triumphant and life opportune,
They scarce believe the happy theme they sing,
And their songs pass and mingle with the moon,

The fair, the mournful moon, so silently
Making the birds to dream in coverts lone,
And the slim founts to sob with ecstasy
Among the tranquil statues bowed in stone.

The Faun

From Paul Verlaine

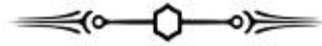


An old clay faun eternally
Laughs from the center of the green,
Foretelling some ill end to be
Born of these moments too serene

That have led you and have led me,
Sad pilgrims of a glad demesne,
Even where the final moments flee,
Timed to the sounding tambourine.

En Sourdine

From Paul Verlaine



Calm within the twilight woven
By the lofty boughs above,
Let us with the deep unproven
Silence blend our proven love.

Heart and spirit, molten, waning,
Senses faint with ecstasy,
Mix them with dim languors raining
From the pine and arbutus-tree.

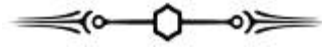
Hold thy lids but half apart,
On thy breast thine arms entwine,
Chase from out thy drowsing heart
All desire and all design.

Let us lend our being wholly
To the cradling breeze that passes,
Wrinkling at our feet the lowly
Ocean of long russet grasses.

And when falls on solemn air
From black oaks the evening,
Voice of our unvoiced despair,
There the nightingale shall sing.

Ariettes Oubliées

From Paul Verlaine



The nightingale, gazing below from the height of a branch, believes that it has fallen into the river. It is in the top of an oak, and all the while it fears that it will drown.

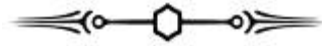
— Cyrano de Bergerac.

The tree-reflections in the misty river die
Like a vapor on the sky,
While in the very boughs, 'neath the true firmament,
The turtle-doves lament.

How oft, O traveler, on this landscape wan and dim
Would thine own wan image swim,
And, all among the lofty leaves, how mournfully
Wept the drowned hopes of thee.

Crimen Amoris

From Paul Verlaine



In a palace of silk and gold, in Ecbatana,
Beautiful demons, adolescent Satans brave,
Mid the sound of dulcimers of Arabia,
To the seven sins their fivefold senses gave.

How fair it was, that feast of the sins which are seven!
Every desire glowed out in a brutal blaze;
The appetites, prompt pages harried and driven,
Set forth the rose-red wines upon golden trays.

Dances were danced to the rhythm of hymens of old,
Swooning and sinking away like unfinished sighs,
And the choral voices of men and women unrolled
With the beating of seas that fall, of billows that rise;

And from all these things a fulness went forth and a power
And a sorcery too strong for earthly bonds,
Till the plains around were filled with roses in flower
And the night itself was adorned with diamonds.

The fairest of all that evil seraphic host
Was but sixteen. Bowing his blossom-crowned head,
With arms upon jewelled fringe and collar crossed,
He dreamed, his eyes full of flames and tears unshed.

Vainly mounted the feast to a dizzier madness,
Vainly the brother Satans, the Satanesses,
To win him away from his desolating sadness,
Would hearten him with cajolements and caresses.

Deaf was he, and wholly insensate now,
And sorrow had set an ebon butterfly
Amid the jewels that burdened his ivory brow.
O dreadful despair! despair that could not die!

He said to his brothers and sisters: "Let me be."
When one by one they had kissed him with tender care,
He slid from their arms, evading them agilely,
And left in their hands his lappets of purple and vair.

They beheld him soon on the most celestial tower
Of the proud palace, bearing a torch on high
As a warrior bears the brandished sword of power.
From below, it blazed like a morning star in the sky.

They heard him cry in a deep and tender voice
(With the crackling torch for chorus and period)
That made the pale, ecstatic moon rejoice)
"I am he, that rebellious one who will be God!

"Too greatly have we suffered, angels and men,
In this endless war between the Worst and the Best,
Humiliated, unhappy have we been
In darkling flights by the simplest vows addressed.

“Enough and too much of battles that none wins,
Whose ultimate end is only to reunite
The Three Divine Virtues with the Seven Sins,
Enough and too much of these combats dull and trite.

“In retort to Christ, who believes that He does well
To equilibrate the duel from above,
Through me this golden, silken lair which is Hell
Shall be sacrificed to the universal Love!”

From his outspread hand the flaring torch fell down...
And the fires kindled, rising and howling behind —
A monstrous war of red eagles that seemed to drown
In the black eddyings of the smoke and wind.

The gold ran molten in streams and the marble shattered,
A mighty furnace with heat and splendor brimmed,
And the burning silk in splendid flakes was scattered
From a furnace hearted with light and luminous-rimmed.

And the dying Satans sang amid the flame,
Having understood, with hearts and souls resigned,
And the choral voices of men and women became
One with the clamors of fire and the fiery wind.

And he, with folded arms, with a haughty air,
His eyes to heaven, where the licking flames grew long,
Spoke in an undertone a sort of prayer
That sank and died in the gladness of the song,

Spoke in an undertone a kind of prayer,
His eyes to heaven, where the licking flames grew long,
Till a frightful thunder resounded above the glare
And made an end of the gladness and the song.

But unacceptable was the sacrifice,
Someone among the strong and the just had surely
Unmingled the malice and the artifice
In the skeins of a lying pride involved obscurely.

Of that high palace, proud with its hundred towers,
No ruin remained... no shadow nor any gleam.
How frightful the prodigy! the halls, the bowers
Became no more than a vain and vanished dream...

Night, blue night with a thousand stars comes back.
A sweet, severe and evangelical plain
Extends, and vastnesses that are veils of black;
The boughs of trees seem ready to tremble again,

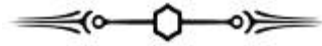
The cold streams run in a bed of pebbles and stone,
The sweet owls vaguely swim in an atmosphere
Where the balms of prayer and mystery are blown;
Sometimes in the rill a ripple flashes clear;

A doubtful figure climbs on the distant steep
Like a love whose unshapen features change and flow;
And the mists that soar from immobile roots asleep
Aspire, it would seem, to a goal where all things go.

And all these things, like a single heart and soul,
Like a spoken word, and with a virginal love,
Worship, and flower in ecstasy, and extol
Him that guards from evil, the clement God above.

The Wheel of Omphale

From Victor Hugo



It stands in the atrium, the fine spinning-wheel of ivory.
The nimble wheel is white, and the distaff is black,
The distaff is ebony encrusted all with lapis.
It stands in the atrium on a rich carpet.

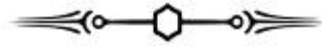
A workman of Aegina has carved upon the base
Europa, whose complaint the god hears not.
The white bull carries her. Europa, desperately,
Cries out, and looking down, is terrified to see
The monstrous ocean kissing her rosy feet.

Thread, and needles, and half-open boxes,
The wool of Miletus, colored with purple and gold,
These fill a basket near the sleeping wheel.
Meanwhile, in the heart of that queenly palace,
Twenty misshapen and enormous phantoms,
Twenty monsters, all ensanguined, and half-seen,
Wander and throng about the sleeping wheel:
Nemea's lion, the hydra of Lerna,
Cacus, the dark brigand of the dark cavern,
The triple Geryon, and the typhons of the waters
Who breathed with a great noise at evening in the rushes;
All bear on their heads the bloody blow-marks of a mace,
And all, without approaching, pass with a terrible air,

And upon the wheel, where hangs a fine and fastened thread,
They fix from afar in the shadows their humiliated eyes.

The Sleep of the Condor

From Leconte De Lisle

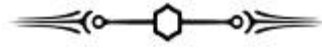


Above the stairs of the steep Cordilleras,
Above the clouds that the black eagles haunt,
Higher than the summits hollowed Out in craters
Where boils the blood-like flux of familiar lavas,
With hanging spread of wings whose tips are reddened,
The huge Bird, full of heavy, mournful indolence,
Looks down in silence on America and space
And on the somber sun expiring in his bleak eyes.
The night rolls from the east, where the wild pampas
Under terraced mountains endlessly expands;
It lulls to sleep the towns and shores of Chile
And the Pacific seas and the supernal horizon;
It is possessed of the silent continent:
From ocean-sand to upland hill, from chasm to slope,
From summit to summit swells, in whirlpools ever-widening,
Its high and heavy tide overflowing all.
He, like a specter lone, on the brow of the haughty peak,
Bathed by a gleam that bleeds upon the snow,
Awaits the sinister sea beleaguering him.
It comes, and bursts, and covers him entire.
In gulfs that have no bourn the Southern Cross has kindled
Its constellated pharos on the heavenly coast.
He breathes with a rattle of pleasure, he shakes his plumes,

He erects his muscular and naked neck,
He lifts, lashing the hard snow of the Andes,
With a hoarse cry he mounts where never wind attains,
And far from the dark globe, far from the living world,
He sleeps in the icy air on his great wings.

Elysian Landscape

From Pierre Lièvre



Eternal autumn gilds the trees whereon
an ardent twilight lengthens endlessly.
In a warm strong wind the leaves whirl on and on
while unremitting rays fall from a sky
monotonous and wan.

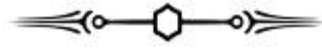
Wines of the wild grape hang from colonnades
whose broken shafts lie round the fountains rim.
Blossoming roses climb the balustrades
and over garden paths the arbors trim
prolong their close arcades.

Peopled by flocks of pigeons turbulent
a ruinous palace in the sunset flares.
Dim statues seem to stir, in its niches pent,
while peacocks trail adown the leaning stairs
their plumes too opulent.

Amid so lovely shadows and serene places
dwell radiant beings in one calm attitude
immutable in wisdom and in graces...
but the sovereign boredom of beatitude
prevails on all their faces.

Madrigal

From Christophe des Laurières

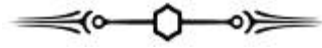


Low-lidded eyes thou hast,
But all too beautiful for love to bear:
Fain would I kiss them fast
Like tranquil flowers closing
Tired with the burden of the sunset air.

The bosom's mootful white
Is softly curved, but fraught with poignant sorrow:
Thereon my lips reposing
In long and proved delight
A comfort from their present bane would borrow.

The Nymph

From Christophe des Laurières



Last night I was a vagrant faun:
I followed through the woods of dream
Where singing dryads led me on
By glimpses of a singing stream.

Half-seen beneath the broken moon,
Where lace of shadows fell and shifted,
Their wanton shoulders warm with June
Aroused me like a breast uplifted.

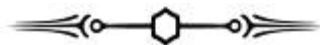
With limbs that fled, and faces turning,
And lips where song and laughter blent,
They passed, and I, in questful yearning,
After them with the shadows went.

Ah clinging weariness that came
To clog at last my lonely feet!
Despairing of the hapless game,
I flung me in a still retreat;

And there, amid the ferns that kept
Her clear and veiless thighs from view,
I found a smiling nymph who slept —
And, lo, the sleeping nymph was you!

Chansonette

From Christophe des Laurières



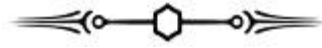
Little of worth my heart has found
Beyond thine arms' enchanted bound:
Between the feet and hair of thee
Lie all the shores of Faery,
And he that wanders there has won
To the island-vales of Avalon.

My kisses' road from knees to mouth
Is all I know of north and south,
Thy rounding bosom endlessly
Shall still my sought horizon be,
My bravest dream a bird that flies
In the warm heaven of thine eyes.

A subtle perfume flows from thee
Like summer borne from Araby.
O realm of all delight, where love
Is fain to dwell, is fain to rove!
The fairest Islands of the Blest
Are those that rise upon thy breast.

An Old theme

From Christophe des Laurières

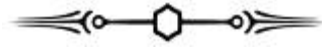


Harder is this to bear than love's own pain —
That love and even pain alike shall pass
Nor haply come again.

Ah, can we seize the moonlight on the grass,
Or bid the shadow stay
Beneath the growing day?
Give me thy mouth to kiss,
Give me thy breasts to hold
Ere love's desire and love's delight grow old
And the last sun go down upon the last abyss.
Ah, share thy body and its joy with me,
So, if the moments pass,
At least they shall not pass too emptily.

Classic Epigram

From Christophe des Laurières

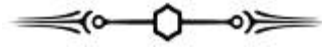


Sweet Lesbia, when our love is done,
Leave no reproachful shade or blot,
No least reproof, on all or aught
That made us twain, that made us one:

Say only, Love has lived his hour
Blameless as any rose's bloom,
And faultless now his final doom
As is the dying of the flower.

Exotic Memory

From Christophe des Laurières



Thy body bright as wine-washed ivory,
Thy fervid charms, bare as the moon is bare,
I knew them all (I know not when nor where)
In lands beside some amber-foaming sea.

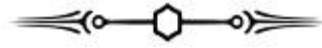
On a terrace crowned with terebinth and palm
I found thee lying, languid and supine,
Thy breast of dreams voluptuous and divine
All given to the winds of myrrh and balm.

We saw the sun, a molten amethyst,
Sink in the scented ocean's foam and fire
And a slow night with ruby planets rise;

And all the night's black temple walled our tryst,
Where, with libations and with liturgies,
We served the burning altars of desire.

By the River

From Christophe des Laurières



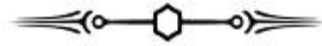
I deemed the golden nymphs were gone,
And pausing by the river, mused
On naiads and the forest-faun,
And idly broke the bronzing reeds
The lips of Pan would once have used.

Upon the willow-fretted stream
I watched the ripples fall and melt
Like amorous laughter in a dream,
And saw the silver thistle-seeds
Float wave-ward on a wind unfelt...

I deemed the golden nymphs were gone...
And then — I turned, and saw you rise
Nude as a nymph that flees the faun,
With anklets of the foam's white beads,
And Hellas in your halcyon eyes!

Moments

From Christophe des Laurières



From all the moments of our love,
What moment would I most recall?
That first mad kiss, that made you swoon
Upon the bedded leaves of fall?

That hour, when careless of the ferns
And blossoms crushed whereon we lay,
I found the fruits of my desire
Amid your garments' disarray?

That time upon the tiger-skin
When kiss by kiss my lips had set
A rosy girdle round your breast
And round your throat a carcanet?

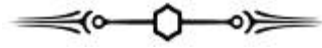
That eve when sudden rapture was
The rainbow of a storm of tears,
And something in us rose and bloomed
That dies not with the barren years?

The dawn that found us wakeful still,
And lit the flushing window-pane —
Till I arose and drew the blind
And sought your waiting arms again?

Alas! I cannot bear to choose
Where all is infinitely dear:
From all our love, I would not lose
A smile, a pulse-beat or a tear!

Tempus

From Christophe des Laurières

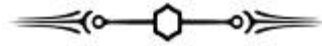


O lethal Acheron gliding ever
In stealth between her mouth and mine,
Between our avid limbs, however
Closely these may cleave and twine,

O stanchless time, when shall we stay
Thy flowing with a straiter kiss,
With tighter hands retain the day
That trickles down the old abyss?

Tristan to Iseult

From Christophe des Laurières



My thirst is as the thirst of light
On gardens long foredrained of dew:
A longing goes from me to you
Not all your sweetness shall requite,
And all my blood is wind-blown fire...
Ah, in the desert of desire,
The fleeting fountains of delight!

Long hopeless, long forlorn of peace,
My lips are burning with your name,
Your kisses fall like flame on flame
And in your flesh is no release:
Ever I hear, in heart and vein,
The tumult of a surging main,
The unturning tides that never cease.

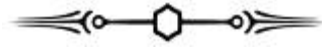
Far off, for others, slumber lies
A valley-land of leaf and bloom
The still, unfallen stars illumine:
My sleep is made of flaring skies
And meads where running flame has been,
Where ashen blossoms crumble, in
A sere and blasted paradise.

Somewhere, on rose and rosemary,
On lotus red and lotus wan,
Distill the dews of Acheron:
Not yet, not yet, for you and me
To find the placid fields of death
And spend our sighs upon the breath
Of poppies of Persephone.

My thirst is as the thirst of light
On gardens long foredrained of dew:
A longing goes from me to you
Not all your sweetness shall requite
And all my blood is wind-blown fire.
Ah, in the desert of desire
The fleeting fountains of delight!

Concupiscence

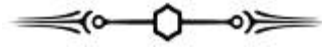
From Christophe des Laurières



As the fierce faun, on the cypress-bearded cape,
Desires the sea-girl, seen with billow-drifted
Hair the color of kelp and shadowy-rifted
Vulva that only knows the slow sea's rape,
And vainly stares, till the fair, unfondled nape
Goes down to ocean's coral-crofted valleys:
Then, in a daylong dream, he swings and dallies
Through the close gulfs about her swirling shape
And turns not when familiar dryads come
To tickle his bowed neck with sharpening tips
Of laughter-lifted bosoms, or to snare
His nodding yerd with loops of noon-warm hair: —
Thus, Lais, am I fain for masterdom
Upon thy flown unparted thighs and lips.

Heliogabalus

From Christophe des Laurières



I

He, the supreme idealist of Sin,
Through scarlet days a white perfection sought —
To make of lyric deed and lyric thought
One music of perverse accord, wherein
The songless blatancy and banal din
Of all the world should perish: he had wrought
From Vice a pure, Pentelic Venus, fraught
With lines of light and terror, that should win
The plaudits of the stars... But prevalent
For him, above the achievable desire,
And Life perfectible by Sin and Art,
Such lusts as leave the Titans impotent
Allured, and Life and Sin, in worlds apart,
Were fair with suns of quintessential fire.

II

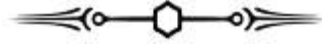
For him the mystery whose name is Love
Took many veils and vestures, haunting him
Through subtle, chill, uncertain loin and limb
Of lesbians pale as Aphrodite's dove;
Or in the doubtful thighs and bosom of

Hermaphroditus, fugitive and dim;
Or his own face, on autumn pools aswim
Through windless shadows of a golden grove.

The vestal moon, the violating sun,
For him were made Love's metamorphoses;
Till, flown from these, as from the forms of old,
The god was gone in worlds beyond access,
With flame-ensculptured bosom found of none,
And eyes too bright with inenarrable gold.

In Alexandria

From Christophe des Laurières



Your body was an altar of delight,
With almond petals strewn,
Whereat we worshipped in the shrine of night.

Pale as the vernal moon,
You gave our lips your languid bosom bare
And limbs that seemed to swoon.

Faintly, from drooping feet to trailing hair,
You trembled with our kisses
Numberless as the flowers fallen there.

Through Love's unknown abysses
Your lovers twain were wafted far with you,
While in strange triune blisses,

Deeper than death, we died and lived anew.

Satiety (Dear)



Dear you were as is the tree of Being
To the happy dead in heaven's bowers...
Whence and what, this evil spell that flings me
Forth from love with loveless eyes unseeing?

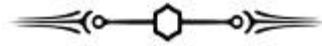
Fair you were as nymph or queen of vision,
Bosomed like the succubi of dreams...
All your beauty turns to sad, ironic
Weariness, and sorrowful derision.

Lo, of what avail our spent caresses —
Kisses that set the summer night aflame?...
Mute, enormous languor without cause —
What is this my autumn heart confesses ?

All your breast was fragrant like the flowers
Of the grape on hills toward the south...
Love is acrid now like staling asters
Sodden with the rain of autumn hours.

The Whisper of the Worm

From Christophe des Laurières



How long, O soul, hast parleyed with the worm —
Hearing how long the whisper subtle-sweet
From out the dust thy Sisyphean feet
Must darkly vex and travel for a term?

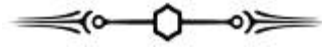
“Lie down with me: supreme and sole release
I proffer, from the weariness of things,
From ways where with no serpent-staff nor wings
Thou pantest still; I am the way of peace.

“Lie down with me, lie down, and thou shalt know
The secret known to slave and Pharaoh,
And win the final wisdom of the dead:

“Like couches amaranthine-piled and deep
Where love may lie, by pleasure laid asleep,
I make the mould or marble of thy bed.”

The Funeral Urn

From Christophe des Laurières



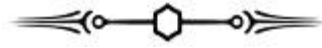
My heart is like some onyx urn
Upon whose cold and carven side
Antique symbolic serpents glide
In scrolls that wander and return;

Where orchid and where columbine
Intort their blooms ambiguously;
Where over some exotic tree
Clambers the grape's familiar vine.

How fair and strange the art thereof!
But — irony supreme — within,
The poisonous black dust of sin
And ashes from dark pyres of love.

Mors

From Christophe des Laurières



Sweeter the thought of death to me
Than love's own sleep or any dream;
Than starlight on some ebon stream
Or moonlight on the marble sea.

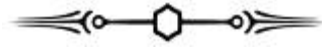
Like black and mummia-laden wine
My soul foredrains oblivion:
The bitter splendors of the sun
Resolved in Lethe's anodyne.

Love and desire and dead delight
And dead despair are shades that pass
As in a necromancer's glass
To mingle with the shades of night.

They pass... The secret peace I crave
Like a black shroud enwraps me round —
Lost, and voluptuously drowned
In the dark languor of the grave.

La Forteresse

A Benjamin DeCasseres



Loin du tumulte, et loin du braîment de la foule,
J'ai bâti pour moi-même un donjon dans l'oubli:
Embrasant tout pennon rembruni ou pâli,
Un couchant d'autrefois sur mes fiers murs s'écoule.

De trésor oublié, ravi des rois anciens,
Dort son sommeil de flamme en mes voûtes profondes;
L'anneau de Salomon se relève des ondes
Pour semer sur mon or ses reflets orient.

Du siège fait de jais, de bijoux et d'al bâtres,
Je vois par mes vitraux violets et verdâtres
La fuite de tout rêve, ou d'ailes de flamant

Ou d'ailes de corneille; et parfois mes magies
Font s'élever encor d'aurores inonïes
Des univers noircis qui sombraient en néant.

Outlanders



By desert-deepened wells and chasmed ways,
And noon-high passes of the crumbling nome
Where the fell sphinx and martichoras roam;
Over black mountains lit by meteor-blaze,
Through darkness ending not in solar days,
Beauty, the centaress, has brought us home
To shores where chaos climbs in starry foam,
And the white horses of Polaris graze.

We gather, upon those gulfward beaches rolled,
Driftage of worlds not shown by any chart;
And pluck the fabled moly from wild scaurs:
Though these are scorned by human wharf and mart —
And scorned alike the red, primeval gold
For which we fight the griffins in strange wars.

The Envoys



None other saw them when they came
Across the many-clangored mart,
But in mine eyes and in my heart
They passed as might the pillared flame
Of lightning loosened on the tombs,
Or errant suns that wander by
To dawn on the Cimmerii.

Great monarchs, proud and cypress-tall,
With zones and crowns of argentry,
They were, who proffered royally
Full urns of pulsing gems to all: —
The blood-warm gems of lunar wombs,
Pale ores, and opals pavonine,
And beryls like to leopards' eyne.

Their eyes were lit with alien day,
Were filled of alien worlds; their feet
With starry splendors paved the street,
And silver dust of some bright way
Fell from their garments, with perfumes
More strange than breath of vernal gales
From Saturn's moly-cinctured vales.

What embassy were they, from suns
Of Algebar or Capricorn —

From planets of remoter morn
In flaming fields where Taurus runs —
Or haply come, immediate,
From out a four-dimensioned world
Within the occlusive ether furled?

They strode upon the swooning pave,
They towered by the trembling spires,
Tall as apocalyptic fires
Above the peoples of the grave:
But, sightless and inveterate,
To Mammon vowed, the throng went by,
Charneled beneath an iron sky.

Yea, blinder than the steel and stone,
Men took not from their proffered store
One gift of all the gifts they bore,
But sued for gold to gods foreknown.
I, too, bemused, inebriate,
Amort with splendor, could but stand
And see them pass, with empty hand.

Shadows



Thy shadow falls on the fount,
On the fount with the marble wall...
And in alien time and space
On the towns of a doomed race
The shadows of glaciers mount;
And patchouli-shadows crawl
On the mottling of boas that bask
In the fire of a moon fantasque;
And the light shades of bamboo
Flutter and ruffle and lift,
In the silver dawn they sift
On the meadows of Xanadu...
They shall fall, till the light be done,
By moon and cresset and sun,
From gnomon and fir-tree and throne,
And the vine-caught monoliths leaning
In the woods of a world far-flown;
They shall pass on the dim star-dials
By the peoples of Pluto wrought;
They shall follow the shifted vials
Of a sorceress of Fomalhaut;
They shall move on the primal plains
In the broken thunder and rains;
They shall haply reel and soar
Where the red volcanoes roar

From the peaks of a blackening sun;
They shall haply float and run
From the tails of the lyre-birds preening
On the palms of a magic mead;
And their mystery none shall read,
And none shall have known their meaning
Ere night and the shadows are one.

Nyctalops



Ye that see in darkness
When the moon is drowned
In the coiling fen-mist
Far along the ground —
Ye that see in darkness,
Say, what have ye found?

— We have seen strange atoms
Trysting on the air —
The dust of vanished lovers
Long parted in despair,
And dust of flowers that withered
In worlds of elsewhere.

We have seen the nightmares
Winging down the sky,
Bat-like and silent,
To where the sleepers lie;
We have seen the bosoms
Of the succubi.

We have seen the crystal
Of dead Medusa's tears.
We have watched the undines
That wane in stagnant weirs,

And mandrakes madly dancing
By black, blood-swollen meres.

We have seen the satyrs
Their ancient loves renew
With moon-white nymphs of cypress,
Pale dryads of the yew,
In the tall grass of graveyards
Weighed down with evening's dew.

We have seen the darkness
Where charnel things decay,
Where atom moves with atom
In shining swift array,
Like ordered constellations
On some sidereal way.

We have seen fair colors
That dwell not in the light —
Intenser gold and iris
Occult and recondite;
We have seen the black suns
Pouring forth the night.

On A Chinese Vase



Lovely as on the boughs of spring
Beneath the fallen suns of Ming,
There bloom the flowers of the plum
Where bloomless autumn shall not come
That came for all the years of Ming.

And here the flower-white herons peer
Unmoving on a waveless mere;
And ever, past the green bamboo,
The halcyon flies toward the blue
From waters where the herons peer.

Enchanted realm of porcelain
Whereon the sunken suns remain,
Wherein the perished blossoms bloom!
An ancient spring defers its doom
Within this land of porcelain.

The Thralls of Circe Climb Parnassus



Between the mountain meadow and the pines
In one still wave the flowered azaleas clomb —
A billow laced and crested with pale foam
Unscattered by the balsam-bearing winds.

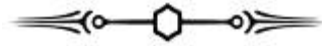
High-rearing on their miry haunches, where
Some grassy-bottomed tarn had sunk and died,
A black hog and his mate stood side by side,
Sniffing those elfin blossoms cool and fair.

Straying in new-found freedom, hungry still,
They had gone forth beneath the immaculate sky
Through fir-set fells beyond their broken sty

And lofty valleys, wild and aspen-grown...
As those who haply seek for husks and swill
Amid the flowers upon Parnassus blown.

To George Sterling: A Valediction

I



Farewell, a late farewell! Tearless and unforgetting,
Alone, aloof, I twine
Cypress and golden rose, plucked at the chill sunseting,
Laurel, amaracus, and dark December vine
Into a garland wove not too unworthily
For thee who seekest now an asphodel divine.
Though immaterial the leaf and blossom he,
Haply they shall outlinger these the seasons bring,
The seasons take, and tell of mortal monody
Through many a mortal spring.

II

Once more, farewell! Naught is to do, naught is to say,
Naught is to sing but sorrow!
For grievous is the night, and dolorous the day
In this one hell of all the damned we wander thorough.
Thou hast departed — and the dog and swine abide,
The fetid-fingered ghouls will delve, on many a morrow
In charnel, urn and grave: the sun shall lantern these,
Oblivious, till they too have faltered and have died,
And are no more than pestilential breath that flees
On air unwall'd and wide.

III

Let ape and pig maintain their council and cabal:
In ashes gulfward hurled,
Thou art gone forth with all of loveliness, with all
Of glory long withdrawn from a desertless world.
Now let the loathlier vultures of the soul convene:
They have no wings to follow thee, whose flight is furled
Upon oblivion's nadir, or some lost demesne
Of the pagan dead, vaulted with perfume and with fire,
Where blossoms immarcescible in vespertine
Strange amber air suspire.

IV

Peace, peace! for grief and bitterness avails not ever,
And sorrow wrongs thy sleep:
Better it is to be as thou, who art forever
As part and parcel of the infinite fair deep —
Who dwellest now in mystery, with days hesternal
And time that is not time: we have no need to weep,
For woe may not befall, where thou in ways supernal
Hast found the perfect love that is oblivion,
The poppy-tender lips of her that reigns, eternal,
In realms not of the sun.

V

Peace, peace! Idle is our procrastinating praise,
Hollow the harps of laud;

And not necessitous the half-begrudgèd bays
To thee, whose song forecrowned thee for a lyric god,
Whose name shall linger strangely, in the sunset years,
As music from a more enchanted period —
An echo flown upon the changing hemispheres,
Re-shaped with breath of alien maiden, alien boy,
Re-sung in future cities, mixed with future tears,
And with remoter joy.

VI

From Aphrodite thou hast turned to Proserpine:
No treason hast thou done,
For neither goddess is a goddess more divine,
And verily, my brother, are the twain not one?
We too, as thou, with hushed desire and silent paean,
Beyond the risen dark, beyond the fallen sun,
Shall follow her, whose pallid breasts, on shores Lethean,
Are favorable phares to barges of the world;
And we shall find her there, even as the Cytherean,
In love and slumber furred.

To George Sterling (Deep)



And I too found the seaward way

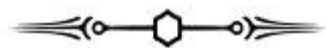
— *Venus Letalis*.

Deep are the chasmal years and lustrums long
Since, following that dark Venus of thy dream,
Thou camest to the lulling foams's extreme...

But, safely builded beyond change and wrong,
And past "the fleeting plaudits of the throng,"
With blazons blown on some ethereal stream
In crystal and in haliotis gleam,
Crag-founded, thine aeolian domes of song.

Yet, ah! the vanished voice we shall not hear!
Alas! thy footsteps ending on the sand
By doubtful seas and skies not understood...
Strange shells are found along that silent strand:
Thou too hast often held them to thine ear
And heard the baffled murmur of thy blood.

La Mare



La lune décroissante
Se couche en noir dédale
D'une aunaie automnale
Dans la nuit sans luisante.

Je me perds et m'égare
Auprès des eaux profondes,
Ténébreuses, immondes,
D'une funeste mare.

Les loques de l'automne
Comme elles s'en envolent,
Dans leur chute me frôlent:
Je tremble et je frissonne.

Et ma rêvasserie
S'effeuille à l'eau prochaine
Au feuillage du frêne —
Pareillement flétrie.

Vaticinations



I heard the leaves of the willow whisper
As they fell at morn on the gusty mere:
“You shall be torn and blown as we are,
In a wind that bears the crumbling year.”

I heard the boulders murmur mutely
In the noontide sun on the windless hill:
“Sometime you shall be calm as we are
And as tranquil and as still.”

The Hill-Top



Alone upon my hill-top,
After the ravelled rains,
I see the cloudy mountains,
I see the misty plains.

Fair is my hill, and rugged,
Where silken grasses grow,
And the drifted clouds go by me
More soft than woven snow.

The pale fantastic lichens
Make patterns on the stone,
And the oaks are old and dwarfed
With golden mosses grown.

Beneath the ancient boulders
There dwells the shadowy fern;
And here the twisted pine-trees
To shapes of beauty turn.

I wander through the seasons
With thoughts of love and grief
That fall with the flowers of springtime
Or blow with the autumn leaf.

Between the plains and mountains,
Between the clouds and grass,

I find the dreams that linger,
And the fairer dreams that pass.

Lichens



Pale-green and black and bronze and grey,
In broken arabesque and foliate star,
They cling, so closely grown
Upon the sombre stone
That one would deem they are
As much a part thereof as the design
Is part of some old porcelain from Cathay —
Some vase of Tang or Ming
Patterned with blossoms intricate and fine
And leaves of alien spring
Exempt forever from the year's decay.
Old too they seem and with the stones coeval —
Fraught with the stillness and the mystery
Of time not known to man;
Like runes and pentacles of a primeval
Unhuman wizardry
That none may use nor scan.

Cumuli



They seem the enfolding mountains of some fairer land
That lies beyond the world,
With vales of purpling rose in hills eburnean furled
And halcyonian flowers unplucked of any hand

I deem their creamy crags look distantly on meres
Where misty torrents fall
Sleepily through the silver dimness covering all,
Vague as the magic air of half-remembered years.

Below their sun-bright passes, leading palely down
To meadows never seen,
Are fruits that star with shadowy gold the strange demesne,
The purple realms of peace that bear no tower nor town.

And though they change and pass, with toppling peaks unstable,
To leave the lands we know,
This fantasy is mine from long and long ago,
A dream unproven still, and still inviolable.

December



From the sad leaves withdrawn,
Remote, estranged and cold,
Forgetful autumn's gold
Alone abides in some December dawn.

Tearless and clear and chill
As eyes that have forgot
Far love, or find it not,
The pale bright heavens arch the barren hill.

Now, in this afternoon
Enchanted, blue and brief,
The year has lost its grief
In valleys mute below the spectral moon.

For here no mourning-dove
Laments the season flown:
On love that wanders lone
Falls the blue balm of silence from above.

For here no zephyr grieves
To tell the year's dead dream;
And down the pine-lulled stream
Lost memories drift and loiter with the leaves.

Warning

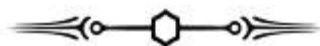


Hast heard the voices of the fen,
That softly sing a lethal rune
Where reeds have caught the fallen moon —
A song more sweet than conium is,
Or honey-blended cannabis,
To draw the dreaming feet of men
On ways where none goes forth again?

Beneath the closely woven grass,
The coiling syrt, more soft and deep
Than some divan where lovers sleep,
Is fain of all who wander there;
And arms that glimmer, vague and bare,
Beckon within the lone morass
Where only dead things dwell and pass.

Beware! the voices float and fall
Half-heard, and haply sweet to thee
As are the runes of memory
And murmurs of a voice foreknown
In days when love dwelt not alone:
Beware! for where the voices call,
Slow waters weave thy charnel pall.

The Nightmare Tarn



I sat beside the moonless tarn alone,
In darkness where a mumbling air was blown —
A moulded air, insufferably fraught
With dust of plundered charnels: there was naught
In this my dream but darkness and the wind,
The blowing dust, the stagnant waters blind,
And sombre boughs of pine or cypress old
Wherefrom a rain of ashes dark and cold
At 'whiles fell on me, or was driven by
To feed the tongueless tarn; within the sky
The stars were like a failing phosphor wan
In gutted tombs from which the worms have gone.
But though the dust and ashes in one cloud
Blinded and stifled me as might a shroud,
And though the foul putrescent waters gave
Upon my face the fetors of the grave,
Though all was black corruption and despair,
I could not stir, like mandrake rooted there,
And with mine every breath I seemed to raise
The burden of some charnel of old days,
Where, tier on tier, the leaden coffins lie.

While sluggish black eternities went by
I waited; on the darkness of my dream
There fell nor lantern-flame nor lightning-gleam,

Nor gleam of moon or meteor; the wind
Withdrawn as in some sighing tomb, declined,
And all the dust was fallen; the waters drear
Lay still as blood of corpses. Loud and near
The cry of one who drowned in her despair
Came to me from the filthy tarn; the air
Shuddered thereat, and all my heart was grown
A place of fears the nether hell might own,
And prey to monstrous wings and beaks malign:
For, lo! the voice, O dearest love, was thine!
And I — I could not stir: the dreadful weight
Of tomb on ancient tomb accumulate
Lay on my limbs and stifled all my breath,
And when I strove to cry, the dust of death
Had filled my mouth, nor any whisper came
To answer thee, who called upon my name!

A Fable



O lords and gods that are! the assigning tide, upon
Some prowless beach where a forgotten fisher dwells,
At last will leave the sea-flung jars of Solomon;

And he, the fisher, fumbling 'mid the weeds and shells,
Shall find them, and shall rive the rusted seals, and free
The djinns that shall tread down thy towering iron hells

And turn to homeless rack thy walled Reality;
That shall remould thy monuments and mountains flown,
And lift Atlantis on their shoulders from the sea

To flaunt her kraken-fouled necropoles unknown;
And raise from realm-deep ice the boreal cities pale
With towers that man has neither built nor overthrown...

O lords and gods that are! I tell a future tale.

Au Bord du Léthé



Les pétales des vieux pavots,
Et les boutons des lys perdus,
Au bord du Léthé sont déchus
Pour joncher le fleuve sans flots.

Là se fanent des anémones,
Des lys tigrés, et des muguetts,
Leurs pâles fleurs, leurs fruits violets,
Là tombent près des belladones.

Et là gisent les floraisons
D'automne, sous les vents sans trames;
Et là, des funestes jusquiames
Mêlent aux pensées leurs fleurons...

Et tous mes amours, tous mes mots,
Et tous mes rêves, disparus,
Au bord du Léthé sont déchus
Pour joncher le fleuve sans flots.

L'Espoir Du Néant



La douceur du dernier anéantissement!
O! l'hydromel des morts nous boirons lentement,
Comme des éivrés qui buvotent leurs vins!
Profond comme l'arnbême, et plus inépuisable,
Il nous accordera la paix incomparable,
Le sommeil, qui renferme un univers sans fins,
Et qui fait les bonheurs des anges moins divins.
Mais il n'aura jamais de memorables rêves
Pour offrir à nos nuits leurs sataniques dons —
Pour restaurer dans notre oubli les trahisons
Et les travaux du temps: un grand trêve sans trêves
Il sera dans la guerre immortelle des dieux
Aux fourmis en la terre, aux aigles dans les cieux.

Bientôt nous le boirons, d'étain, d'or ou de verre,
Bientôt nous trouverons pour lit et pour suaire
Son Léthé qui s'écoule à travers l'infini:
Avec les vieux soleils, nous dormirons la nuit.
Bientôt, comme une mer aux plus enormes ondes,
Sa nuit avalera les astres et les mondes,
Et bientôt ce sera du sommeil suffisant
Pour Jésus et Satan, éivrés du Néant.

Un Paysage Païen



Je songe à cette terre ancienne
Où des couchants longtemps déchus
Dorent des grands cygnes perdus
Pagayant dans une eau païenne
Au pied des rochers blancs et roux,
Où le souffle est si lent et doux
Qu'il ne seme à la lame oisive
Les frêles fleurs des myrtes verts
Qui poussent pardessus des mers
Du haut de la plage massive.

C'est un pays d'où les vieux dieux
N'ont pas volés vers d'autres cieux;
Où des hélléniques lamies
Nous leurrent au couvert caché;
Où des dryades endormies
Gisent dans l'ombrage taché
D'un soleil d'or par la saulaie;
Où la sirene dans la baie
Du glauque golfe approfondi
Nage indolemment à midi.

Il n'est pas de châsses croulées,
Il n'est pas de lauriers cassés:
On trouve ici les jours passés
Et les nuits longtemps écoulées.

Pour nous, qui viendrons plus tardifs
À ses vallons, à ses massifs,
Ce pays reste impérissable,
Sommeillant chimériquement
Et baigné par l'enchantement
De sa jaune anbe intarissable.

A Dream of the Abyss



I seemed at the sheer end:
Albeit mine eyes, in mystery and night
Shrouded as with the close deep caul of death,
Or as if underneath Lethean lentors drowned,
Saw never lamp nor star nor dead star's wraith of light
Yet seemed I at the world's sheer end;
And fearfully and slowly I drew breath
From silent gulfs of all uncertainty and dread,
Precipitate to nadir from around;
Nor trusted I on any side to tread
One pace, lest I should overstep the brink,
And infinitely and forever sink
Past eye-shot of the Cyclopean sun
When from the bulwark of the world, adown oblivion,
He on the morrow should stare after me.

Swift from infinity,
The enormous Fear that lives between the stars
Clutched with the cold great darkness at my heart;
Then from the gulf arose a whispering,
And rustle as of silence on the wing
To stay and stand
Anear at my right hand:
What powers abysmal, born of the blind air,
What nameless demons of the nether deep

That 'scape the sun and from the moonlight live apart,
Came and conspired against me there,
I heard not, ere the whispering
Ceased, and a heavier darkness seemed to spring
Upon me, and I felt the silence leap
And clasp me closer, and the sweep
Of ah the abyss reach up and drag
Body and feet from the crumbling uttermost crag
To the emptiness unknown;
Nor knew I, plunging through those nadir firmaments,
If Azrael or Abbadon bore me thence,
Or if I fell alone.

To Howard Phillips Lovecraft



Lover of hills and fields and towns antique,
How hast thou wandered hence
On ways not found before,
Beyond the dawnward spires of Providence?
Hast thou gone forth to seek
Some older bourn than these —
Some Arkham of the prime and central wizardries?
Or, with familiar felidae,
Dost now some new and secret wood explore,
A little past the senses' farther wall —
Where spring and sunset charm the eternal path
From Earth to ether in dimensions nemoral?
Or has the Silver Key
Opened perchance for thee
Wonders and dreams and worlds ulterior?
Hast thou gone home to Ulthar or to Pnath?
Has the high king who reigns in dim Kadath
Called back his courtly, sage ambassador?
Or darkling Cthulhu sent
The sign which makes thee now a councilor
Within that foundered fortress of the deep
Where the Old Ones stir in sleep
Till mighty temblors shake their slumbering continent?

Lo! in this little interim of days
How far thy feet are sped
Upon the fabulous and mooted ways
Where walk the mythic dead!
For us the grief, for us the mystery...
And yet thou art not gone
Nor given wholly unto dream and dust:
For, even upon
This lonely western hill of Averaigne
Thy flesh had never visited,
I meet some wise and sentient wraith of thee,
Some undeparting presence, gracious and august.
More luminous for thee the vernal grass,
More magically dark the Druid stone,
And in the mind thou art forever shown
As in a magic glass;
And from the spirit's page thy runes can never pass.

After Armageddon



God walks lightly in the gardens of a cold, dark star,
Knowing not the dust that gathers in His garments' fold;
God signs Him with the clay, marks Him with the mould,
Walking in the fields unsunned of a sad, lost war,
In a star long cold.

God treads brightly where the bones of unknown things lie,
Pale with His splendor as the frost in a moon-bleached place;
God sees the tombs by the light of His face,
He shudders at the runes writ thereon, and His shadow on the sky
Shudders hugely in space.

God talks briefly with His armies of the tomb-born worm,
God holds parley with the grey worm and pale, avid moth:
Their mouths have eaten all, but the worm is wroth
With a dark hunger still, and he murmurs harm
With the murmuring moth.

God turns Him heavenward in haste from a death-dark star,
But His robes are assoilèd by the dust of unknown things dead;
The grey worm follows creeping, and the pale moth has fed
Couched in a secret golden fold of His broad-trained cimar
Like a doom unsaid.

Chance



Bow down before the daemon of the world —
This monstrous god, half-idiot and half-ape,
With fumbling hands omnipotent to shape
A harlot's breast or build great altars. Hurl'd
From the lost sun to sunless hell, or whirled
Back to their heaven with equal jest and jape,
All other gods shall nevermore escape
His will that once begot them. Wars unfurled
With banners blown like ever-wandering fires
From realm to realm conflagrant, or the play
Of coupling mice or monsters, wake alway
To his dominion. Darkly born thereof,
The troubling atoms teem to stars and byres,
The leper's flesh, the white flesh of thy love.

Ennui (In)



IN THE ALCOVE whose curtains are cloth-of-gold, and whose pillars are fluted sapphire, reclines the emperor Chan, on his couch of ebony set with opals and rubies, and cushioned with the furs of unknown and gorgeous beasts. With implacable and weary gaze, from beneath unmoving lids that seem carved of purple-veined onyx, he stares at the crystal windows, giving upon the infinite fiery azures of a tropic sky and sea. Oppressive as nightmare, a formless nameless fatigue, heavier than any burden the slaves of the mines must bear, lies forever at his heart: all deliriums of Love and wine, the agonizing ecstasy of drugs, even the deepest and the faintest pulse of delight or pain—all are proven, all are futile, for the outworn but insatiate emperor. Even for a new grief, or a subtler pang than any felt before, he thinks, lying on his bed of ebony, that he would give the silver and vermilion of all his mines, with the crowded caskets, the carcanets and crowns that lie in his most immemorial treasure-vault. Vainly, with the verse of the more inventive poets, the fanciful purple-threaded fabrics of the subtlest looms, the unfamiliar gems and minerals from the uttermost land, the pallid leaves and blood-like petals of a rare and venomous blossom—vainly, with all these, and many stranger devices, wilder, more wonderful diversions, the slaves and sultanas have sought to alleviate the iron hours. One by one he has dismissed them with a weary gesture. And now, in the silence of the heavily curtained alcove, he lies alone, with the canker of ennui at his heart, like the undying mordant worm at the heart of the dead.

Anon, from between the curtains at the head of his couch, a dark and slender hand is slowly extended, clasping a dagger whose blade reflects the

gold of the curtain in a thin and stealthily wavering gleam. Slowly, in silence, the dagger is poised, then rises and falls like a splinter of lightning. The emperor cries out, as the blade, piercing his loosely-folded robe, wounds him slightly in the side. In a moment the alcove is filled with armed attendants, who seize and drag forth the would-be assassin-a slave-girl, the princess of a conquered people, who has often, but vainly, implored her freedom from the emperor. Pale, and panting with terror and rage, she faces Chan and the guardsmen, while stories of unimaginable monstrous tortures, of dooms unnamable, crowd upon her memory. But Chan, aroused and startled only for the instant, feels again the insuperable weariness, more strong than anger or fear, and delays to give the expected signal. And then, momentarily moved, perchance, by some ironical emotion, half-akin to gratitude-gratitude for the brief but diverting danger, which has served to alleviate his ennui for a little, he bids them free the princess; and, with a regal courtesy, places about her throat his own necklace of pearls and emeralds, each of which is the cost of an army.

Apostrophe



O world, thou art the form, the name, the symbol of my weariness:
But, older than thy drooling god, mine ennui had its prime abode
Potential in the fathomless, foreshaping yawn of night and flame.

O world, thou shalt abide and be, for some brief travail of the sun,
The form and name of my distress, an image of the weariness
That shall survive thy kalpas done, the doom that is eternity.

Sonnet (Empress)



Empress with eyes more sad and aureate
Than sunset ebbing on a summer coast,
What gold chimera lovest thou the most —
What gryphon with emblazoned wings elate,
Or dragon straying from the dim estate
Of kings that sway the continents uttermost
Of old Saturnus? Or what god, or ghost,
Or spacial demon for thy spirit's mate
Art fain to choose? Howbeit, in thy heart,
Though void as now to vision and desire
The days and years deny thee, shall abide
The passion of the impossible, the pride
Of lust immortal for the monstrous ire
And pain of love in scarlet worlds apart.

The Saturnienne



Beneath the skies of Saturn, pale and many-mooned,
Her palace is;
Her wyvern-warded spires of celadon, enruned
With names benign and mightier names of malefice,
Illume with saffron phares
A marish by the black, lethargic seas lagooned;
Her dragon-holden stairs
Go down in coiling jet and gold on some unplumbed abyss.

Long as a leaping flame, exalted over ail,
Across the sun
Her banners bear Aidennic blooms armorial
And beasts infernal on a field of ciclaton;
Amid her agate courts,
Like to a demon ichor, towering proud and tall,
A scarlet fountain spurts,
To fall upon parterres of dwale and deathly hebenon.

From out her amber windows, gazing languidly
On a weird land
Where conium and cannabis and upas-tree
Seem wrought in verdigris against the copper sand,
She sees and sees again
A trailing salt like leprous dragons from the sea
Far-crawled upon the fen;
And foam of monster-cloven gulfs beyond a fallow strand.

Or, looking from her turrets to the south and north,
She notes the gleam
Of molied mountains and of rivers pouring forth,
Clear as the dawn, to fail in fulvous rill and stream
The widening waste amid;
Or swell the fallen meres, abominable, swarth,
In green mirages hid,
To be the unquested grails of bell, of death and deathful dream.

Une Vie Spectrale



Je fus longtemps un vieux fantôme,
Flottant léger comme un arôme
Autour de mes tombeaux détruits,
Et dans mes salles écroulantes
Que soutenaient des lourds atlantes
Aux dos de métaux inouis.

J'ai recontré des reines pâles
Et des nalîdes trop spectrales
Que je baisais au bel antan
Plus loin que les sphères lointaines;
J'ai respiré les spectres vaines
Des roses mortes dès maint an.

J'ai demeuré sur une terre
Qui n'était que cendre et poussière;
Cherchant des floraisons flétris
Dans des ténèbres croupissantes,
J'ai flairé, faibles et stagnantes,
Les puanteurs des dieux pourris.

Mes nuits étaient des nuits passées
Où luisaient des lunes glacées,
Des noirs hiers étaient mes jours;
Des choses longuement perdues,

Des souvenirs disparues,
M'apparaissaient dans ces séjours.

Je n'écoutais que des voix grêles,
Je ne touchais que des seins frêles
Des succubes plus exsangues;
Je ne sentais qu'une détresse
Trop languissante, une tristesse
Sans goûts, sans parfums, et sans teints.

Je m'ennuyais dans cette vie,
Et les mortels m'ont fait envie:
Ainsi me voilà maintenant
Soulevant un corps comme d'autres,
Portant un cœur comme les vôtres,
Un très tangible revenant.

Song of the Necromancer



I will repeat a subtle rune —
And thronging suns of Otherwhere
Shall blaze upon the blinded air,
And spectres terrible and fair
Shall wake the riven world at noon.

The star that was mine empery
In dust upon unwinnowed skies:
But primal dreams have made me wise,
And soon the shattered years shall rise
To my remembered sorcery.

To mantic mutterings, brief and low,
My palaces shall lift amain,
My bowers bloom; I will regain
The lips whereon my lips have lain
In rose-red twilights long ago.

Before my murmured exorcism
The world, a wispy wraith, shall flee:
A stranger earth, a weirder sea,
People with shapes of Fäery,
Shall swell upon the waste abysm.

The pantheons of darkened stars
Shall file athwart the crocus dawn;

Goddess and Gorgon, Lar and faun,
Shall tread the amaranthine lawn,
And giants fight their thunderous wars.

Like graven mountains of basalt,
Dark idols of my demons there
Shall tower through bright zones of air,
Fronting the sun with level stare;
And hell shall pave my deepest vault.

Phantom and fiend and sorceror
Shall serve me...till my term shall pass,
And I become no more, alas,
Than a frail shadow on the glass
Before some latter conjurer.

In Thessaly



When I lay dead in Thessaly,
The land was rife with sorcery:
Fair witches howled to Hecate,
Pouring the blood of rams by night
With many a necromantic rite
To draw me back for their delight...

But I lay dead in Thessaly
With ah my lust and wizardry:
Somewhere the Golden Ass went by
To munch the rose and find again
The shape and manlihead of men:
But in my grave I stirred not then,

And the black lote in Thessaly
Its juices dripped unceasingly
Above the rotting mouth of me;
And Worm and mould and graveyard must
And roots of cypress, darkly thrust,
Transformed the dead to utter dust.

Lines on a Picture



O face upturned to alien splendors!
Sybil, what visions have you seen
In haunted worlds? what music hearkened
In Edens hushed and vespertine?

The far is near, the near is distant
For you that dwell in dreams untold...
And yet... and yet... perchance not wholly
Their riddled meaning lies unrolled.

Perchance your mouth is strangely wistful
For hidden things you know not of:
Your eyes forget, your lips remember
Some lost and Atlantean love.

Refuge



Though winter come with cleaving rain with bonds of rime,
It shall not sever us, the dreamers calm and wise,
From succor and solace of our pagan paradise:

For in your cypress-bole, still standing from the prime,
Dear hamadryad you and I shall drowse content,
Bosom to bosom, till the evil term be spent.

And, though the wrackful storm on seas and headlands climb,
Another dreamer has found a long-abiding home,
Safe in the nereid's cavern, far beneath the foam.

But Grant, O Venus



Though love had dreamt of soft eternities
For never-flagging pulses still to mete,
Those minutes of our bliss were few and fleet.
Breast-pillowed in their aftermath of ease,
She said to me at midnight: "Memories
Are all we have in the end." Ah, bitter-sweet
The doom that tolling bells of thought repeat —
This verity of solemn verities
Wherein the sorrowful senses find despair
And the heart an iridescence on dark tears...
But grant, O Venus of the hidden hill,
That many a rose-lit eve remain to share,
And midnights in the unascended years,
And starry memories unbegotten still.

Town Lights



For him who wanders up and down
Its long-familiar streets in autumn nights,
With melancholy meaning shine the lights
Of the small, scattered town.

Often, where lamp-bright windows cast
Their homely splendor forth on tree and lawn,
Strange moths of dream and memory are drawn,
Flown from the ghostly past.

And kisses faint as falling mist
Await the wanderer at some old door,
And sorrowful voices crying Nevermore
From bygone lips he left unkissed.

What panes illumed by love's own lamp
Are darkened now, or lit by alien hands;
Where friendship sat before the rose-red brands
Comes in the invasive cold and damp,

Or strangers make oblivious cheer:
Till he that watches dimly from without
Peels as a leaf blown in the autumn's rout
From desolate trees foredoomed and sere.

But still he turns, and marks again
Some aureate lamp that friends have lit afar;

Some radiance, with love for inner star,
That burns behind a trellised pane;

Knowing if it were not for these,
His vagrant soul would haunt a vaster night
Lit only by the inalienable light
Of all the quenchless galaxies.

Strange Girl



What bond was this, of life or doom,
That swiftly drew your eyes to mine
Beyond the drinkers and the wine,
Across the crowded, garish room?

Beauty was yours, but beauty lost,
Bringing to that familiar bar
The lustre of a fallen star
On strands of night and chaos tossed.

O yours were soft, unhappy lips,
O yours were hard, unhappy eyes
Like agates under glacial skies
Laden with tempest and eclipse.

Upon the delicate chin you turned
Venus had set her cloven sign.
Like embers seen through darkest wine
Your unextinguished tresses burned.

Your gown revealed that gracious form
Tanagra's sculptors loved to mould
In day immortal from of old,
With limbs for ever sweet and warm.

Of what we spoke, it matters not:
For in your wistful voice I heard

What hidden things that found no word —
Broken, half-dreamed or half-forgot.

Girlishly, half maternally,
You chid me for the fault we shared:
Your voice was sweet... your eyes despaired...
It was your eyes that wounded me,

So bleak they were, so wan and chill,
Like eyes that meet the Gorgon's gaze
Amid the untraversable maze
Of all-reverting shame and ill.

But when you leaned to kiss me there,
It seemed some fragile moth of night
Had softly touched my lips in flight,
Swerving athwart the untroubled air.

Sister you seemed to all the woe
My heart has known but never sung...
Was it for this your fingers clung
To mine, as loath to let me go?

If Winter Remain



Hateful, and most abhorred,
about us the season
of sleet, of snow and of frost
reaches, and seems unending
as plains whereon
lashed prisoners go,
chained, and enforced
to labor in glacial mines,
digging the baubles of greybeard kings,
of bleak Polarian lords.

Benumbed and failing
we languish for shores Canopic
that founder to vaults of fire,
for streams of ensanguined lotus
drinking the candent flame
with lips unsered, unsated,
for valleys wherein no shadow,
whether of cassia or cypress,
shall harbor the ghost of ice,
the winter's etiolate phantom.
Benumbed and failing,
we languish for shores Canopic
that founder to vaults of fire.

Fain would we hail the summer,
like slaves endungeoned
beneath some floe-built fortress,
greeting their liberator,
the hero in golden mail...
But... if summer should come no more,
and winter remain
a stark colossus
bestriding the years?
if, silent and pale,
with marmoreal armor,
the empire of cold
should clasp the world
to its rimed equator
beneath the low,
short arc of the sun,
out-ringed by the far-flung
orbit of death?

Poets in Hades



At an inn called the Sign
Of the Acherontic Pump,
Two poets drank their ebon wine
In memory of the rose and amber
Essence of the vine.

Mummy of the Flower



Stiff and brown and dusty —
Coffined in the drawer,
I found the oleander-flower:
The love that in your tresses died,
Mummified.

The Heron



Entranced, unstirring,
Stands the heron
By the river's rippled gleam:
Fishes twinkle in the stream
And in his dream.

Bird of Long Ago



All that I remember
From a dim and verdant spring
Long dead
Is, that one bright mouche of red
Patched a blackbird's wing.

Someone



An orphaned baby
Fallen from its crib
On the floor
Crawls and gropes for a lost nipple
Evermore.

Late November Evening



Startled, I heard the clack and clatter
Of the stiff plane-leaves, blown abroad
Upon the paven road:
The noise of cymbals clashed by night
In autumn's flight.

Epitaph for An Astronomer



Shall he find
Novae in the darkness blind?
Or phantom of a farther sun?
These follow him not nor shall forerun
Where the night and stars are one.

Copyist



I write the poems down
Line by line from old anthologies
Printed on the air and ether,
Shelved amid the leaves of trees,
Between the stars, or under stones
And mouldered bones.

Love And Death



Lying on the tiger-skin
In the secret, safe boudoir,
Lovers eat
The spicy luncheon-meat
Brought by several relays
From the abatoir.

The Limniad



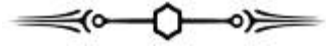
The pool's green lymph
Whitens with the floating nymph
Who rises algae-fleeced.

Borderland



One cactus-column rears alone
Before the forest
Where the trees are stone.

Lethe (From)



From the nameless dark distilled,
Lethe flows
Through the night that no man knows.

Odysseus in Eternity



Oblivion

Swells our sails and bears us on

To the seas beyond the sun.

The Ghost of Theseus



Where nights are one with days
I roam the empty stony maze
That stalled the Minotaur.

Declining Moon



Close above the snow-scene,
Blue, purple, yellow-green
Clouds ring the moon.

Nocturnal Pines



From my door the pines,
To Polaris pointing,
Spoke the turning Signs.

Phallus Impudica



Through the rotting leaves,
Autumn fungi thrust:
Pale similitudes of lust.

Stormy Afterglow



In the east at sunfall
Lightning tore the clouds' tall
Rose and violet scarps.

Foggy Night



Hastening I strode
Past the drunkard lying
Beside the moonless road.

Reigning Empress



From thy beauty
And thy lovers' ardent wars
Time shall make his metaphors

Mushroom-Gatherers



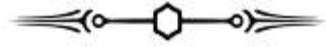
When our pails were brimmed,
Mushrooms white and brown
Clustered where the slope went down.

Spring Nunnery



Before the nunnery's cold
Walls the poplar-leaves unfold,
Plums are flowering.

Nuns Walking in the Orchard



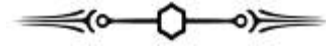
Sable-robed, at noon,
They passed beneath red cherries
Ripening with June.

Improbable Dream



In my dream a nun,
Proudly bosomed, lunar-pale,
Danced naked in the sun.

Crows in Spring



Glossy-backed, the crows

Ward the garden-rows:

One turns to watch the farmer.

High Mountain Juniper



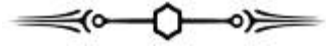
Far above pine and fir,
Mortised in granite aeons,
Stands the juniper.

Storm's End



At the storm's decline,
A vulture seeks its nest
In the bolt-cloven pine.

Pool At Lobos



Anemones yawn,
Shells walk, peaked and whorled,
In a still crystal world.

Poet in A Barroom



Faces of the four seasons

Throng the bar:

One peers from a time-lost star.

Fallen Grape-Leaf



From the fallen leaf
And from my deciduous heart
Fades the scarlet.

Slaughter-House Pasture



Horned skulls and boned hooves

Litter the field

Together with the fallen leaves.

Gopher-Hole in Orchard



Again, from the gopher-hole
I plugged with straw and stones,
Bubbling, the water runs.

Basin in Boulder



In the boulder's top
The time-hollowed basin
Fills with rain, drop by drop.

Indian Acorn-Mortar



In the granite pits
Crumbling oak-leaves nestle;
Lichens asterick the pestle.

Old Limestone Kiln



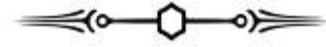
In the crumbling topless kiln
Pines have taken root,
Oaks drop their fruit.

Love in Dreams



I saw you not nor heard,
Knowing your presence as one knows
The night-found rose.

Night of Miletus



When I saw you dance,
Milesian roses swayed in the wind
Of a lost romance.

Tryst At Lobos



I would meet you where
Summer vaults of cypress
Keep the balsams of the past.

Prisoner in Vain



About your wrists I bound
Fetters of water-grass
Where the streamlet wound.

Mountain Trail



In the steepest mile,
Climbing the mountain path,
You held my hand awhile.

Future Meeting



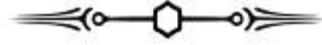
By what digit of the moon
Shall I question, late or soon,
Your shoal-green eyes?

Classic Reminiscence



The herd of goats for us
Turns the hillside to a scene
From Theocritus.

Goats And Manzanita-Boughs



To the gathered boughs we hold
Flock the goats
From the close-eaten wold.

Picture by Piero Di Cosimo



On the pagan down
Blithesome, naked, brown
Satyrs loot the bee-tree.

Garden of Priapus



With lowered lids, you nod:
Somewhere in the garden
Lurks the garden-god.

Bed of Mint



Fragrant were the embraces
That I shared with you
Where the wild mint grew.

Chainless Captive



Beauty is the prisoner
None can hold,
Though all have captured her.

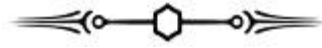
January Willow



Far-separate, a few
Leaves illumed with perished autumn
Space the boughs against the blue.

Snowfall on Acacia

I



Drooping low,
Acacia-branches bear their double
Burden of flowers and snow.

II

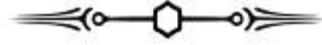
Humped with snow, the golden
Sprays careen, lifting free
Suddenly.

Flight of the Yellow-Hammer



A flame of orange ashen-flecked
In a wavering line
Takes wing from pine to pine.

Sunset Over Farm-Land



Over fields newly ploughed,
Pools of golden leaf-green
Broaden in the mallow cloud.

Flora



Spring came down the mountain-side,
Gentian-eyed,
From the snow-rimmed fountains.

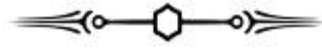
Windows At Lamplighting Time



Black houses set
With little squares of golden dawn
Lift where the sunset darkens.

Old Hydraulic Diggings

I



From the bedrock bottom
Dolomites upbear
Pines with roots that reach in air.

II

Roots of gnarled manzanitas
Tortuously coil,
Clutching the cobbled soil.

III

On the graveled slide
A log that ancient fires have charred
Lies, petrified

IV

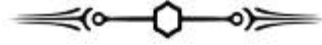
The reflex of stark rufous walls
Into milky waters green
Unfathomably falls.

Hearth on Old Cabin-Site



In the ruined fire-place
Grows the summer-brown fern,
And a few poppies burn.

Builder of Deserted Hearth



In what winter shrewd, morose,
Did he cower close
To the manzanita-blaze?

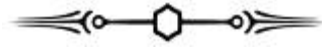
Aftermath of Mining Days



Monotonously rolled
On the hills the broom
Spreads its many-acred gold.

River-Canyon

I



Moss-cup oaks, broadly sprawled,
Clench the path, with sapling laurels
Intervalled.

II

Ledge-thinned waters
Falling, divide and ravel
Over ferns and cress and gravel.

III

Arbors of the wild grape
Climb from alder-tops
To the cliff-grown copse.

IV

Columbine and Indian pink
Light the vine-fringed pool
Where the foxes drink.

V

High above
In their azure-walled estate

Shrills the red hawk to his mate.

VI

Far down the gorge steepens
Where inch by centuried inch the channel
Deepens.

VII

By the grape's long root
We clamber from the last ledge
To the river's edge.

VIII

With bronze and silver stippled
Runs the shallow-rippled
River over stones.

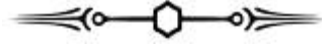
IX

Pebbles and driftwood
High-lodged amid the willows
Mark the winter-widened flood.

X

Ouzels dart, swiftly gone,
Past the heron standing
Stirless and alone.

School-Room Pastime



With pencils on scratch-paper
We drew grotesques
And passed them underneath our desks.

Boys Telling Bawdy Tales



Half-ignorant ribaldries,
Outrageous drolleries
Of infant Rabelais.

Water-Fight



Heaving rocks into the stream,
Each rival team
Splashed the other with glad cries.

Boys Rob A Yellow-Hammer's Nest

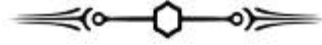


Porcelain-white, the flicker's eggs

Lined the bottom of the hole

In the pine's dead bole.

Grammar-School Vixen



I went homeward by the willowed
Stream-bed, knowing
That she waited on the road.

Girl of Six



You cuddled me and kissed me,
Mussed my hair, and smiled:
The woman in the child.

Snake, Owl, Cat or Hawk



Who

Will heed the downy nestlings

Of the dove the hunter slew?

Cattle Salute the Psychopomp



Penned beside the abattoir,
Stridently they moo and bellow
To the night-bringing star.

Field Behind the Abatoir



Where the mantled bones lie low,
Monstrous weeds and grasses lush
Thicklier grow.

Plague from the Abatoir



On the window-sill
Fall the blow-flies that I kill:
Dozens buzz and blunder still.

La Mort des Amants



One bullet, dark and hard,
Stilled the coupling cats that yowled
In the yard.

Vultures Come to the Ambarvalia



Funereal and austere,
Their downward spiral narrows
On the fallen deer.

For the Dance of Death



In the stirless brake
Click the faint castanets
Of the rattlesnake.

Berries of the Deadly Nightshade



Black are the berries
Laden with slumber
Of nights that have no number.

Water-Hemlock



To the south wind's breath
Lean the stately stalks and umbels
Rooted with death.

Felo-de-se of the Parasite



Dead and leafless too
Clings the clustered mistletoe
On the oak it slew.

To Whom It May Concern



Your soul is a dead chicken lying on a city dump,
Inert and limp and sprawling,
Amid a rotten chaos of inassortable remnants,
Of rain-soaked whisky-cartons and soiled brassieres and worn-out tires and
Sunday suits full of defunct moths
And maybe a blue box or two
Labeled Kotex.

Pegasus will shun your proximity,
All the golden wyverns will avoid you,
Veering to other skies and more savory systems,
And hippogriffs will never come to nuzzle you
With purple-spotted noses of nacarat and cyanine:
Even the ghouls will sniff and pass you by...
But rats will come...

Tin Can on the Mountain-Top



Tomato-can, of thee I sing:
bright beacon of liberty and civilization,
harbinger of progress
left by the picnicker
among the millennial junipers and glacier-moulded granites
on Donner's peak.
Insouciantly you lean, with label already peeling
in gaudy green and crimson décolletage
to reveal your rondure, dimpled slightly here and there by dents but
otherwise perfect
and suggesting with futuristic provocation
and cylindrical breast-form of a strip-teasing robot.
The wind, that ancient lecher, plays with the label
and it falls away like a slip
from around your dazzling flanks.
Profulgently you glitter, like the wings of planes
over Hispania or China,
or like the Coit tower
on a fogless morning.
In you we behold the ultimate avatar
of stellar slag and neutrons long dissolved
into nebulous vapor;
in you the transgalactic goal
of atoms endlessly broken and re-alchemized
in the dark laboratory of time and space

by the demiurge who wears the night for mask.
In you the mystic ore
immured by subterranean gloom for aeons,
and carried obscurely by the womb of worlds
as they wandered on through gulfs and light-years,
in you the oft-remolten and star-pregnant metal
briefly gleams, refracting all the solar rays,
and batting back the electrons from the sun-spots,
and riddled by all the cosmic and ultra-cosmic and infra-cosmic and other-
cosmic radiations.
But soon, too soon, your glory tarnishes,
and the spots and mottlings and zones of stannic oxide
will damascene you with their rufous arabesques,
with their brownish nacarat and ruddled umber;
until you lapse in Huysmanesque corrosion,
colored and surfaced like the planet Mars.

The Nevermore-To-Be



Lady, be the chatelaine
Of my vagrant dreams and vain:
Knowing naught is true and fair
Save the love that is despair,
In thy heart's withholden visne
Share with me the might-have-been,
Weave with me the sorcery
Of the nevermore-to-be.

Lady, let us pluck delight
Only from a forfeit night,
From the bedded myrtles strewn
'Neath a never-risen moon.
From the coil of years made free
In the climes of reverie,
Flee we to the phantom Troy
Of a time-forbidden joy.

Lady, be the chatelaine
Of my vagrant dreams and vain:
Be thou true and be thou kind
To the love we shall not find —
Sweet as aught the sirens sang:
Tome shall bring no dearer pang
Nor a mightier sorcery
Than the nevermore-to-be.

Fantaisie D'antan



Lost and alien lie the leas,
Purpled all with euphrasies,
Where the lunar unicorn
Breasts an amber-pouring morn
Risen from hesperian seas
Of a main that has no bourn.
Only things impossible
There in deathless glamor dwell:
Pegasus and sagittary,
Trotting, part the ferns of faery,
Succubi and seraphim
Tryst among the cedars dim;
Where the beaded waters brim,
White limoniads arise,
Interlacing arms and tresses
With the sun-dark satyresses;
There, on Aquilonian skies,
Gryphons, questing to and fro
For the gold of long ago,
Find at eve an aureate star
In the gulf crepuscular;
There the Hyperboreans,
Pale with wisdom more than man's,
Tell the wileful centauresses
Half their holocryptic lore;

There, at noon, the tritonesses,
All bemused with mandragore,
Mate with satyrs of the shore.
Love, could we have only found
The forgotten road that runs
Under all the sunken suns
To that time-estrangèd ground,
Surely, love were proven there
More than long and lone despair;
Holden and felicitous,
Love were fortunate to us;
And we too might ever dwell,
Deathless and impossible,
In those amber-litten leas,
Circled all with euphrasies.

One Evening



We lay at twilight on the hill
And saw the citron gold of sunset drain,
Delicate as the sunsets of Cocaigue,
From heavens green and still.

Till fallen Venus burned to rose
We lay, and round us lay the lapsing world,
Low vales and hills in dusky velvet furled
That rimmed us with repose.

Above, was naught except the night
And all the stars, like pulses of white fire;
And our dark veins, fulfilled of long desire,
Pulsed with the pulsing light.

Trope



Deem me not dull or cold
For love not always told,

For when the lake at even
Is loin of wind and air,
The moon lies perfect there
As in another heaven.

In somber crystal holden,
In silence exquisite,
No ripple shadows it
Nor blurs the rondure golden.

Deem me not dull or cold
For love not always told.

Canticle



In my heart a wizard book,
Only love shall ever look:
Darling, when thou readest there,
Wisely falter and forbear
Ere thou turn'st the pages olden,
Deeply writ and deeply folden,
Where the legends of lost moons
Lie in chill unchanging runes.
Trifle not with charm or spell,
Heptagram or pentacle,
Leave in silence, long unsaid,
All the words that wake the dead.

Darling, in my heart withholden,
Letters rubrical and golden
Tell the secret of our love
And the philtred spells thereof;
There, my memories of thee,
Half of all the gramarie,
Are a firm unfading lore:
Read but these... and read no more...
Shall it profit thee to find
Loves that went with snow and wind?
Leave in silence, long unsaid,
All the words that wake the dead.

Venus



Since I have seen her luster low and near
And warm and intimate within thine eyes,
Far Venus in her skies
Is fair as any star of Paradise.

But now thou hast departed, many a tear
Bedims her glory when she goes upon
The ways where thou art gone —
Westward and autumnward in silence drawn.

November

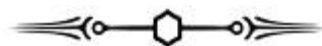


Unshaken still, through wind and rain,
Red autumn rears her blazonry.
But, ah! the barren grief and pain
Of loveliness unshared with thee!
Ah! weariness of leaves and rain.

Wanting thy hand within my hand,
The heart of life eludes my will,
And dimly, through a doubtful land,
The moth of beauty flees me still,
And flutters from my lonely hand.

Until thy mouth be wed to mine,
A secret wound shall bleed in me.
And vain is all the season's wine
And vain her crimson blazonry
Until thy mouth be wed to mine.

Le Miroir Des Blanches Fleurs



Rappelez-vous l'étang dont l'eau nous attirait
Dans des hereux matins,
Voyez-vous noire étang, ceint des buissons alpins,
Où des mignonnes fleurs la blancheur se mirait
Au vert fond assombri par l'ombre des sapins.

C'était un lieu de fée, une scène enchantée
Par quelque charme antique:
L'on aurait y cru voir sortir du bois féérique,
Du fôret des romans, une reine montée
Sur sa cavale pâle au harnais mirifique.

Les hauts rochers au loin, les hauts arbres prochains,
Le silence des eaux
Et le silence noir pesant sur les rameaux,
Tous semblaient apportés des espaces lointains
Qu'endormait un sort blanc aux temps des fabiaux.

O! dans quelle chronique, O! dans quelle légende
Derobée cet age,
Était ce lieu depeint?... Fleurs du petit rivage,
Qui fleurissaient au bord des eaux de l'ancien monde,
Pourquoi donc venez-vous dans ce nouveau parage?

Nous y traînaient, dans nos âmes le sentiment
D'autres temps, d'autres lieux:

Le charme était si fort et si Prestigieux,
Que nul roi des follets, venant fantasquement,
N'eut étonné nos coeurs avec sont cor mielleux.

— Et toi, dont loeil aimé doublait ce paysage,
De quelle dame altièrè
As-tu porté un peu la pâleur légendaire?
Et moi, de quel trouvère errant au vieux bocage,
Ai-je connu l'amour, les chants, et la chimère?

Les Marées



Mon coeur se desemplit d'une immense rancune
Qui retire sa mer sous quelque occulte lune.
Sous quelque lune noire, au lointain de l'esprit:
Aux sables trop lavés, les eaux d'amour ont ri,
Et les nymphes de l'onde, oubliant l'amère mer
Sourient lentement dans une molle écume.

O lune du bonheur, ne t'éloigne jamais,
Soulève incessamment tes lames désormais:
Reveille en moi la mer pour chanter des louanges,
Pour crier un cher nom aux côtes plus étranges,
Pour cacher doucement les recifs roids et nus.
Laissant renaître aussi l'éternelle Vénus:
Maintiens ta douce mer à sa pleine marée
Pour bai gner les pieds blancs de ma belle adorée.

The Autumn Lake



O sapphire lake amid autumnal mountains,
With fire of aspens round about you burning,
I would my love and I were now returning,
Perchance to leave you never —

To dwell with you, and know the mountain seasons,
The fleeing cloud, the cliff and pine eternal,
The fall of leaf and snow and blossom vernal
Upon your placid waters.

Winter Moonlight (I)



After our fond, reiterate farewells
In the shadow of the wall, between the lamplight and the moon,
I left you, and returned, and, torn from you once more,
Departed loath and laggardly
Into the icy, luminous, immense white night.
But, though mine every step was a gulf dividing us
On ways forlorn and chill,
I was not cold nor sorrowful nor alone,
Nor friended by regret:
For love went with me like the warmth of a hearth-lit room
And soft enfolding arms;
And the widening space between us
Was somehow one with love,
And evermore I knew
That your heart and my heart were islanded
In the same full-tided sea of happiness and light,
And washed by the same waves of vibrant memory,
Like shores of halcyon summer
Where halcyon perfumes mount beneath a burning moon.

To Antares



Antares, star of memory,
Her name I whisper unto thee;
Be thou tonight my messenger
And featly bear my love to her,
When she, as I, with like desire,
Gazes upon thy sanguine fire,
Dreaming of all thou sawest of old,
Things not to be forgot or told,
And borne beyond all others' knowing
By tongueless Lethe in its flowing:
Till, gazing thus, in one same thought
Our hearts shall be together brought,
And each insuperable mile
Forfeit its triumph, for awhile.

Connaissance



Only through the senses have I known you,
But you are nearer than the things of sense —
Nearer than is the daylight in mine eyes,
And nearer
Than scent of orchard blossoms in the dark,
Or touch of mountain wind or water flowing,
Or long belovèd music heard once more
Among belovèd faces.
The sense of you is more than sight or audience,
The thought of you lies deeper
Than the clear springs of recollection,
The shallow tarns of dreaming.
You flow a stronger blood within my blood,
Poured from a heart whose pulses
Suffuse the veins of centaurs and of gods.
You are a thought encompassing all other thoughts,
Even as the sea enfolds the kelp and coral
And the sea-flowers arid sea-monsters
And the domes of deep unsunned Atlantis.

Exorcism



Like ghosts returning stealthily
From those grey lands
Palled with funereal ashes falling
After the burnt-out sunset,
The mists of the valley reach with wavering, slow,
Malignant arms from pine to pine, and climb the hill
As fatal memories climb
To assail some heart benighted and bewitched...

And once they would have crept
Around me in resistless long beleaguerment,
To lay their death-bleak fingers on my heart:
But now
My memories are of you and of the many graces
And tender, immortal, mad beatitudes of love;
And every chill and death-born phantom,
Made harmless now and dim,
Must pass to haunt the inane, unpassioned air;
And only living ghosts
Of raptures gone or ecstasies to be,
May touch me and attain within the circle
Your arms have set about me.

Calendar



To find with you the earliest
Willow-buds before their silver turns to gold,
And the first previous buttercup and cyclamen that blossom
Ere the leaflets of the vernal trees unfold;
To lie with you in June
Beneath a broad magnolia-scented moon,
And under stars and meteors of late summer;
To see with you
The goldenrod become an ashen ghost
And the rose of autumn crumble
And the leaf put on the splendor of the rose,

And the last leaf fall upon the wintry blue
In a wind from the lofty snows;
To sit with you beside the murmuring fire
When a stifled sunset dies,
And watch through misty panes
The boughs that toss upon a winter-driven sky
And the swift eternal slanting of dark rains:

These are my seasons,
This is my calendar,
Where love appoints the course of many a sun and star;
And, wanting you, I should not care nor know
If it were the time of falling jasmine-petals
Or the time of falling snow.

Madrigal of Evanescence



Dear, can we endure to know
How these jasmine-girdled hours
Shall become the long ago?
Love, can we endure to know
How our longing and our woe
Fall like autumn-loosened flowers
Down the gulf of days foredone
On unstelled oblivion?

Love, can we endure to prove
How no longest pang or pleasure
Lengthens out the lot of love?
Dear, can we endure to prove
How the sharpening moons will measure
Our permitted joys, and pass
Autumnward on withered grass?

September



Slumberously burns the sun
Over slopes adust and dun,
Leaning southward through September...
I forget and I remember,
Life is half oblivion...
Somnolently burns the sun.

Close and dim the horizons creep,
Earthward lapse the heavens in sleep;
Woodlands faint with azure air
Seem but bourns of Otherwhere:
Swooning with ensorcelled sleep,
Close and dim the horizons creep.

Embers from a dreamland hearth,
Glow the leaves in croft and garth;
Vines within the willows drawn
Relume the gold of visions gone;
Darkly burn, in croft and garth,
Embers from a dreamland hearth.

Sleepy like an airless fire,
Smoulders my supreme desire:
Throeless, in the tranquil sun,
Hearts could melt and merge as one

In forgetful soft desire
Drowsy like an airless fire.

Indian Summer



Surely these muted days are one with days remembered,
This necromantic sun is an evocation
Of suns whereunder we have walked before:
For when I see the peach-trees
Flame-colored and far off
Where the blueness of the air has crept among them,
The love I feel today
Somehow resumes the bygone flames and shadows,
The vanished incommunicable moods
And fugitive lost colors
Of the love I felt for you in autumns past.

The Dragon-Fly



By the clear green river,
One afternoon in early autumn,
A dragon-fly with crimson wings alit
On the white thigh of my beloved;
And, ever since it flew,
More fully have I known the loveliness
And the transiency of days;
And love and beauty burn within me
Like the piled leaves of blood and amber
That burn at autumn's ending.

Touch



In touching you
My hands have known the savor of delight
As the mouth knows the savor of sweet fruit;
And in your flesh my hands have seemed to hear
A melody that pulsed and pulsed
Even as the melody of dulcimers —
Yea, to my hands
Your flesh has breathed the perfume of its being,
Has sighed a secret essence,
Has given forth its immanent mystery
To mingle with the mystery of mine.

Sufficiency



To house our happy love
We long for an alcove
Curtained against the dawn in Ispahan,
Or some Algerian roof, whereon
At eventide to lie
And watch the fiery passing of the sky;
Till morning takes the last star, ere it set
Beyond the parapet.

And yet,
In this one little room, this homely place,
Have we not known enough of time and space?
With mouths together drawn,
Have we not prayed the night to linger on,
And found as much of glamor manifold,
Of happiness and pleasure,
As our four hands can measure
And our two hearts can hold?

Ineffability



Thy deepest dolor shalt thou tell,
But nevermore thy happiness:
Unworded still and utterless,
The incredible dark raptures dwell.

Too readily our lips repine
For splendor lost and beauty flown:
Our speech is made of earthly moan
And not the praise of things divine.

Ah, facile are the songs we sing
To dulcimers that sorrows mute:
But joy requires a stronger lute
Of high unshatterable string.

Mystery



To me, who have but known
The senses' doubtful lore,
Thy soul is evermore
Mysterious as mine own.

With ears I strive to hear
A song that is not sound,
With eyes, to pierce the bound
Of things unseen and dear.

But in delectable
Dark ways, and wordless speech,
Our hearts throb each to each
The tale we cannot tell.

The flesh unto the flesh
Utters deliciously
Desire and ecstasy
Through all its subtle mesh.

In a swift glance, or in
The close and eyeless night,
As light that meets with light,
My soul has seemed to win

Communion clear with thine,
Has found the oblivion deep

Which is not death nor sleep
But ampler life divine.

Dominion



Empress of all my life, it is not known to thee
What hidden world thou holdest evermore in fee;
What muffled levies rise, from mist and Lethe drawn,

Waging some goblin war at thy forgotten whim;
What travelers in lone Cimmeria, drear and dim,
Follow the rumor of thy face toward the dawn.

Plain are those nearer lands whereon thou lookest forth,
Thy fields upon the south, thy cities in the north:
But vaster is that sealed and subterraneous realm.

High towers are built for thee with hushed demonian toil
In dayless lands, and furrows drawn through a dark soil,
And sable oceans crossed by many an unstarred helm.

Though unto thee is sent a tribute of fine gold
By them that delve therefor, never shalt thou behold
How the ore is digged in mines too near to Erebus;

Though strange Sabeian myrrh within thy censers fume,
Thou shalt not ever guess the Afrit-haunted gloom
Whence the rich balm was won with labor perilous.

Occulted still from thee, thy power is on lost things,
On alien seraphim that seek with desperate wings,
Flown from their dying orb, the confines of thy heaven;

Yea, still thy whisper moves, and magically stirs
To life the shapeless dust in shattered sepulchers;
And in dark bread and wine thou art the untold leaven.

But never shalt thou dream how in some far abysm
Thy lightly spoken word has been an exorcism
Driving foul spirits from a wanderer bewrayed;

With eyes fulfilled of noon, haply thou shalt not see
How, in a land illumed by suns of ebony,
Beneath thy breath the fiery shadows flame and fade.

Dancer



O dancer with the dove-swift feet and hands,
So palely swaying
Against the moon's replenished rondure,
Thou treadest not this autumn ground alone:
But in my heart, as in some high-piled press,
Dancing, thou crushest out with thy wan feet
A vintage strong, a wine sanguinolent
That shall restore the summer.

Wine of Summer



From the deep azure chalice of the sky,
Inverted on the vale
And hot horizons pale,
The philtered wine of summer drains away...
It was but yesterday
We drank that draft together, you and I.

Here in the grove the fallen needles bear,
Broken and disarrayed,
The print our presence made...
O! haunted hollow left by your sweet form!
How the swift tears are warm
In eyes that seek and cannot find you there.

It seems the selfsame wind is in the pine
That sighed or sank above
Our ecstasy and love...
But now no dryad face, no dryad voice
Shall make my heart rejoice,
No dear Bacchante wear the wilding vine.

O love! no other lips than ours have known
How sweet the wine, how sweet
With honey and soft heat
Mingling within that blissful magistral...

And yet how sadly fall

The slow, slow drops for him that drinks alone.

The Mime of Sleep



My dreams are turned to some disordered mime:
A plot that pandemonian shadows feign
Ravels half told; and dead loves live again
In settings of distorted place and time:
A broken drama, puerile or sublime,
Whose riddled meaning I must guess in vain;
A masque, whose grey grotesques of mirth and pain
Move randomly through an occulted clime.

But though they pass, and slumber blot them all,
Your beauty's burning shade more slowly dims —
Where, dancing like Salome, you let fall,
In splendid sequence under a sad sky,
The seven veils of fantasy that I
Have wound about your young, delightful limbs.

Madrigal of Memory



To my remote abandonment
Your deep and lustrous hair has lent
How many an autumn-colored dream;
Your eyes bring many an April gleam
To this my place of discontent.

Like torchy fires your footsteps leap
Where covens of lost dreamers keep
Their sabbat and their bacchanal;
Your breasts are moons that mount and fall
Through the dim, turbulent climes of sleep.

Among the rondured hills that merge
Into the prone horizon-verge,
My haunted eyes have seen, have felt,
Your mobile hips at twilight melt,
Your supple bosom lift and surge.

In dryad ways not understood
You stir and whisper through the wood.
Far off the throbbing waters flow
Against a sanguine afterglow
Like the sweet pulses of your blood.

At morning, from the cloudy south,
Your tresses sweep athwart my drouth.

Night bears amid its magic bower
Your body's many-scented flower
And bud and blossom of your mouth.

Grecian Yesterday



To the loved days we shared alone,
Leda, beyond the moons and miles
The swan of my desire has flown.

Again you stand, as once you stood,
Naked, with sun-ignited hair,
Before the dark Hellenic wood

That hangs beside that halcyon sea:
And all my heart is turned to love,
And love fulfills the veins of me.

No Syrinx flees, no satyr sallies
From the still oaks and brooding bays:
In us their ancient rapture rallies

That sweeps away the world, and brings
Once more the many-flowered prime
After an age of flowerless things.

To the loved days we shared alone,
Leda, beyond the moons and miles
The swan of my desire has flown.

Sonnet (How)



How shall our hearts, those fragile shrines of thee,
Forefend the siege of wrackful circumstance?
Or this thy brittle, earth-wrought beauty be
The unshaken ultimate fortress of romance?
How shall the Golden Age thy bosom brings —
That home of dreams unharbored elsewhere —
Not fall before this brazen press of things,
Till we too fade like morning phantoms there?
How shall one rose from out our seasons done
Rear to the rune of any necromant?...
When all is over, let the cindered sun
Go down in night no memory shall haunt —
Yes, let full-fountained Lethe rise and flow
As on the loves of lovers long ago.

All is Dross that is not Helena



What wistful lover has not mused upon
The waste of years that never knew his love!
And, wanting her once more, the seasons prove
But dearth and draff to feed oblivion.

I deem that all is empty, in my turn,
Beyond your tender arms, your tender heart:
Void and deviceless are the nets of art,
And song and silence are of one concern,

Dearer than Paphos' joy, or Lethe's peace!
In you alone are solace and surcease
Of antenatal dolor, ancient wrong.

You are the supreme boon, the only good
To one, who finds despair in solitude,
And weariness of heart amid the throng.

The Sorcerer to His Love



Within your arms I will forget
The horror that Zimimar brings
Between his vast and vampire wings
From out his frozen oubliette.

The terror born of ultimate space
That gnaws with icy fang and fell,
The sucklings of the hag of hell,
Shall flee the enchantment of your face.

Ah, more than all my wizard art
The circle our delight has drawn:
What evil phantoms thence have gone,
What dreadful presences depart!

Your arms are white, your arms are warm
To hold me from the haunted air,
And you alone are firm and fair
Amid the darkly whirling storm.

Erato



Ah, suffer that my song
To thee alone belong:
No dearer happiness my heart would choose
Than thus to cast, O sweet,
Each measured scroll before thy perfect feet,
Having no other muse.

O wistful love! how well
All that my lips would tell,
All that the lyre's revibrant strings attest,
Was writ upon thy breast
With kisses keen and slow...
So long, so long ago.

What tears are confluent
From springs and summers spent,
Feeding the fount of this our Helicon;
And wine forlornly poured,
Or spilt for thee, O maenad most adored,
In feasts of moon or sun.

Let now some interval
Of lyric silence fall;
Like heavy garlands let thy hair be shed
About by brow and head,

While songs unsung and sweet
Within our pulses beat.

Anodyne of Autumn



Full-ripened on the bough,
Pends the bright apple now,
And the lees fall from out the unclouded wine.
These memories that return
Pour from their mellowing urn
A dreamful and delicious anodyne.

O love! thy face, thy hands,
Long lost in sadder lands,
Somewhere amid this golden dale remain:
All that was flown and dear
Lies somehow warm and near —
Nothing is gone but loneliness and pain.

All day I follow still,
On western wold or hill,
The dream redreamed, the enchantment wrought once more:
Tomorrow brings at last
All blisses of the past
For him that drinks of autumn's mandragore.

No bitter winds awake
In reedy tarn or brake;
The citron sunset leaves an orange moon.
Before my senses float

Thy breasts, thy lips, thy throat
Like fruit of Hesperus in a poppy-swoon.

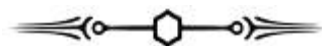
Even in Slumber



This separation cleaveth to the core...
Even in slumber I am fated
To seek thee in vast throngs and dreamlands desolated —
And find thee nevermore.

Bewildering phantoms rise between, and ways
Where demons claim their olden debt;
The rote of sullen streets and streams; the spume and fret
Of planet-blinding sprays.

De Profundis



Too long, alas, too long
My patient heart endures
This deep and desperate wrong —
To walk on fallen ways afar from yours.

O pain that loses not
Its sharp and ancient sting!
O rapture unforgot
Whereof some dark tomorrow yet shall sing!

O spirit, blood and bone
Whose deepening voices cry
She is mine own, mine own,
Though earth and all the ascendant spheres deny:

For her I have arisen
From many a broken tomb,
From out the darkling prison
Of sunken worlds and avatars of doom.

For her I bear the Flame
Replenished from of yore —
Unquenchably the same
Like the great fire within the planet's core.

O Flame that shall not fail
In voids of time and space,

At last you shall avail
To light my feet to her abiding-place.

From Arcady



To you, that went from Arcady
To follow after worldly shows,
My songs shall bring unfailingly
The scent of bay and forest rose.

To follow after worldly shows
You left our laurel-sheltered bourn...
The scent of bay and forest rose
Too heavy lies on hearts forlorn.

You left our laurel-sheltered bourn,
Our love must wander desolate:
Too heavy lies on hearts forlorn
The fallen, faded petals' weight.

Our love must wander desolate,
Weaving in pain, to one wild dirge,
The fallen, faded petals' weight,
The rolling of a roted surge;

Weaving in pain, to one wild dirge,
The ancient, deep, foregone delight...
The rolling of a roted surge
Returns around a pagan height.

The ancient, deep, foregone delight
Wakens the pastoral pipes again,

Returns around a pagan height
To call, nor always call in vain —

Wakens the pastoral pipes again
My songs shall bring unfailingly,
To call, nor always call in vain
To you, that went from Arcady.

On the Mount of Stone



In rock-bound Arabia
Grows the myrrh and cassia
Lost altars burned to Alilat,
And spices that
The phoenix gathered for his pyre.

Laurel-leaves and laurel-blooms,
Dreams, and blood, and flowers
Dropped by Hermes-footed hours,
Feed the fire
Wherein my love consumes
On the mount of stone, and springs
Renewed with young auroral wings.

Avowal



Whatever alien fruits and changeling faces
And pleasancess of mutable perfume
The flambeaux of the senses shall illumine
Amid the night-furled labyrinthine spaces,
In lives to be, in unestablished places,
All, all were vain as the rock-raveled spume
If no strange close restore the Paphian bloom,
No path return the moon-shod maenad's paces.

Yea, for the lover of lost pagan things,
No vintage grown in islands unascended
Shall quite supplant the old Bacchantic urn,
No mouth that new, Canopic suns make splendid
Content the mouth of sealed rememberings
Where still the nymph's uncleaving kisses burn.

The Poems



Pacific Grove, California — in 1954, Smith married Carol Jones Dorman and they moved to Pacific Grove, where he set up a household, including her three children. Smith was often poor and he reluctantly undertook gardening work for the other residents at Pacific Grove.



Smith and his wife at Pacific Grove



Stone sculpture of a mythical cat, carved by Smith for the wall at his Pacific Grove home

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IMAGE

IMAGES

IMPRESSION

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IN COCAIGNE

IN LEMURIA

IN NOVEMBER

IN SATURN

IN SLUMBER

IN THE DESERT

IN THE WIND

IN THESSALY

INCOGNITA

INDIAN ACORN-MORTAR

INDIAN SUMMER

INEFFABILITY

INFERNO

INHERITANCE

INTERIM

INTERROGATION

JANUARY WILLOW

JOVE

JUNGLE TWILIGHT

L'ESPOIR DU NÉANT

LA FORTERESSE

LA MARE

LA MORT DES AMANTS

LA MUSIQUE (MUSIC)

LAMENT OF THE STARS

LAMIA

LATE NOVEMBER EVENING

LATE PEAR-PRUNER

LAUS MORTIS

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LETHE

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The Non-Fiction



Smith, c. 1941

Miscellaneous Essays



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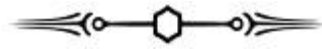
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Smith in later years

George Sterling: An Appreciation



AMONG THE VARIOUS literary fervors and enthusiasms of my early youth, there are two that have not faded as such things most often fade, but still retain in these latter years a modicum of their “fringing flames of marvel.” Unique, and never to be forgotten, was the thrill with which, at the age of thirteen, I discovered for myself the poems of Poe in a grammar-school library; and, despite the objurgations of the librarian, who considered Poe “unwholesome,” carried the priceless volume home to revel for enchanted days in its undreamt-of melodies. Here, indeed, was “balm in Gilcad,” here was a “kind nepenthe.” Likewise memorable, and touched with more than the glamour of childhood dreams, was my first reading, two years later, of “A Wine of Wizardry,” in the pages of the old *Cosmopolitan*. The poem, with its necromantic music, and splendours as of sunset on jewels and cathedral windows, was veritably all that its title implied; and — to pile marvel upon enchantment — there was the knowledge that it had been written in my own time, by someone who lived little more than a hundred miles away. In the ruck of magazine verse it was a fire-opal of the Titans in a potato-bin; and, after finding it, I ransacked all available contemporary periodicals, for verse by George Sterling, to be rewarded, not too frequently, with some marmoreal sonnet or “molten golden” lyric. I am sure that I more than agreed, at the time, with the dictum of Ambrose Bierce, who placed “A Wine of Wizardry” with the best work of Keats, Poe and Coleridge; and I still hold, in the teeth of our new Didactic School, the protagonists of the “human” and the “vital,” that Bierce’s judgment will be the ultimate one regarding this poem, as well as Sterling’s work in general. Bierce, whose

own fine qualities as a poet are mentioned with singular infrequency, was an almost infallible critic.

Several years later — when I was eighteen, to be precise — a few of my own verses were submitted to Sterling for criticism, through the offices of a mutual friend; and his favorable verdict led to a correspondence, and, later, an invitation to visit him in Carmel, where I spent a most idle and most happy month. I like to remember him, pounding abalones on a boulder in the back yard, or mixing pineapple punch (for which I was allowed to purvey the mint from a nearby meadow), or paying a round of matutinal visits among assorted friends. When I think of him as he was then, Charles Warren Stoddard's fine poem comes to mind. I take pleasure in quoting the lines:

TO GEORGE STERLING

“The Angel Israfel, whose heart-strings are a lute, and who has the sweetest voice of all God's creatures.”

*Spirit of fire and dew,
Embodied anew.*

*Vital and virile thy blood —
Thy body a flagon of wine
Almost divine:*

*Thou art a faun o' the wood,
A sprite o' the flood,
Not of the world understood.*

*Voice that is heard from afar,
Voice of the soul of a star.*

*From thy cloud in the azure above
'Tis thy song that awakeneth love —
Love that invites and awe that retards —
Blessed art thou among bards!*

*My astral is there where thou art,
Soul of my soul, heart of my heart!*

*Thou in whose sight I am mute,
In whose song I rejoice;
And even as echo fain would I voice
With timbrel and tabor and flute,
With viol and lute.
Something of worth in thy praise —
Delight of my days —
But may not for lack of skill —
For the deed take the will;*

*Unworthy, ill done, incomplete,
This scroll at thy feet.*

Always to me, as to others, he was a very gentle and faithful friend, and the kindest of mentors. Perhaps we did not always agree in matters of literary taste; but it is good to remember that our occasional arguments or differences of opinion were never in the least acrimonious. Indeed, how could they have been? — one might quarrel with others, but never with him: which, perhaps, is not the poorest tribute that I can pay to George Sterling... But words are doubly inadequate, when one tries to speak of such a friend; and the best must abide in silence.

Turning today the pages of his many volumes, I, like others who knew him, find it difficult to read them in a mood of dispassionate or abstract criticism. But I am not sure that poetry should ever be read or criticized in a perfectly dispassionate mood. A poem is not a philosophic or scientific thesis, or a problem in Euclid, and the essential “magic” is more than likely to elude one who approaches it, as too many do, in a spirit of cold-blooded logic. After all, poetry is properly understood only by those who love it.

Sterling, I remember, considered “The Testimony of the Suns” his greatest poem. Bierce said of it, that, “written in French and published in Paris, it would have stirred the very stones of the street.” In this poem, there are lines that evoke the silence of infinitude, verses in which one hears the crash of gliding planets, verses that are clarion — calls in the immemorial war of suns and systems, and others that are like the cadences of some sidereal requiem, chanted by the seraphim over a world that is “stone and night.” One may quote from any page:

*How dread thy reign, O silence, there !
A little, and the deeps are dumb —
Lo, thine eternal feet are come
Where trod the thunders of Altair!”*

*Crave ye a truce, O suns supreme?
What Order shall ye deign to hark,
Enormous shuttles of the dark,
That weave the everlasting dream?”*

In the same volume with “The Testimony of the Suns” is blank verse poem, “Music,” in which the muse Terpsichore was hymned as never before or since:

*Her voice we have a little, but her face
Is not of our imagining nor time.*

Also, there is the gorgeous lyric “To Imagination,” and many chryselephantine sonnets, among which “Reincarnation,” “War,” and “The flaunting” are perhaps the most perfect.

As I have already hinted, I feel a peculiar partiality for “A Wine of Wizardry,” the most colorful, exotic, and, in places, macabre, of Sterling’s poems. (This, however, is not tantamount to saying that I consider it necessarily his most important achievement.) Few things in literature are more serviceable as a test for determining whether people feel the verbal magic of poetry — or whether they merely comprehend and admire the thought, or philosophic content. It is not a poem for the literal-minded, for those lovers of the essential prose of existence who edit and read our “Saturday Reviews” and “Literary Digests.” In one of the very last letters that he wrote me, Sterling said that no one took the poem seriously any more, “excepting cranks and mental hermits.” It is not “vital” poetry, he said, as “vital” is used by our self-elected high-brows (which probably, means that it is lacking in “sex-kick,” or throws no light on the labor problem and the increase of moronism). I was unable to agree with him. Personally, I find it impossible to take the “vital” school with, any degree of seriousness, and see it only as a phase of materialism and didacticism. The proponents of the utile and the informative should stick to prose — which, to be frank, is all that they achieve, as a rule. Before leaving “A Wine of Wizardry,” I wish, for my own pleasure, to quote a favorite passage:

*Within, lurk orbs that graven monsters clasp;
Red-embered rubies smoulder in the gloom,
Betrayed by lamps that nurse a sullen flame,*

*And livid roots writhe in the marble's grasp,
As moaning airs invoke the conquered rust
Of lordly helms made equal in the dust.
Without, where baleful cypresses make rich
The bleeding sun's phantasmagoric gules,
Are fungus-tapers of the twilight witch,
Seen by the bat above unfathomed pools,
And tiger-lilies known to silent ghouls,
Whose king hath dugged a sombre carcanet
And necklaces with fevered opals set.*

No, "A Wine of Wizardry" is not "vital verse." Thank God for that, as Benjamin de Casseres would say.

Notable, also, in Sterling's second volume, is the lovely "Tasso to Leonora" and "A Dream of Fear-" His third volume, "A House of Orchids," is compact of poetry; and, if I were to name my favorites, it would be equivalent to quoting almost the entire index. However, the dramatic poem, "Lilith," is, I believe, the production by which he will be most widely known. One must go back to Swinburne and Shelley to find its equal as a lyric drama. The tragedy and poetry of life are in this strange allegory, and the hero, Tancred, is the mystic analogue of all men. Here, in the conception of Lilith, the eternal and ineluctable Temptress, Sterling verges upon that incommensurable poet, Charles Baudelaire. In scene after scene, one hears the fugue of good and evil, of pleasure and pain, set to chords that are almost Wagnerian. Upon the sordid reality of our fate there falls, time after time, a light that seems to pass through lucent and iridescent gems; and vibrant echoes and reverberant voices cry in smitten music from the profound of environing mystery.

One might go on, to praise and quote indefinitely; but, in a sense, all that I can write or could write seems futile, now that Sterling is “one with that multitude to whom the eternal Night hath said ‘I am.’ “Anyway, his was not, as Flecker’s,

*The song of a man who was dead
Ere any had heard of his song.*

From the beginning, he had the appreciation and worship of poetry lovers, if not of the crowd or of the critical moguls and pontiffs.

Of his death — a great bereavement to me, as to other friends — I feel that there is really little that need be said. I know that he must have had motives that he felt to be ample and sufficient, and this is enough for me. I am totally incapable of understanding the smug criticism that I have read or heard on occasion. To me, the popular attitude concerning suicide is merely one more proof of the degeneracy and pusillanimity of the modern world: in a more enlightened age, *felo-de-se* will be honored again, as it was among the ancients.

In one of Bierce’s books is a trenchant article entitled, “The Right to Take One’s Self Off.” Here is the final paragraph:

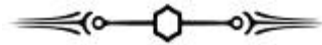
Why do we honor the valiant soldier, sailor, fireman? For obedience to duty? Not at all, that alone — without the peril — seldom elicits remark, never evokes enthusiasm. It is because he faced without flinching the risk of that supreme disaster — or what we feel to be such — death. But look you: the soldier braves the danger of death; the suicide braves death itself”; The leader of the forlorn hope may not be struck. The sailor who voluntarily goes down with his ship may be picked up or cast ashore. It is not certain that the wall will topple until the fireman shall have descended with his precious burden. But the suicide — his is the foeman that never missed a

mark, his the sea that gives nothing back; the wall that he mounts bears no man's weight. And his, at the end of it all, is the dishonoured grave where the wild ass of public opinion

Stamps o'er his head

Bat cannot break his sleep.

Where Fantasy Meets Science Fiction



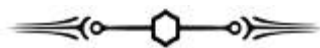
I HAVE PURCHASED many of the issues of your magazine, and have read everything in them, including the letter columns, with great interest. I have particularly enjoyed certain stories, such as “The Forgotten Planet,” “The Jovian Jest,” and “The Planet of Dread,” in which genuine imaginative quality was combined with good writing. Many other tales, not so well written, I have enjoyed for their fantasy, their suggestive ideas.

In following “The Reader’s Corner” I have noted the objection to so-called “impossible” stories, voiced by some of your readers. Stories thus classified, one would infer, are tales dealing with the marvelous and the mysterious in which the author has not attempted to give a naturalistic or scientific explanation of his wonders and mysteries. In other words, he has not rendered them in terms of the test-tube. He has admitted the inexplicable, the “supernatural.”

Personally, I enjoy stories of this type, as well as those that are written with the purely scientific approach. I suspect that those who condemn them are suffering from a rather amusing — and pathetic — sort of unconscious hypocrisy. I think that people who read your magazine, as well as Science Fiction magazines in general, are people with the ingrained human love of wonder and mystery; but some of them are afraid to accept and enjoy anything — even a fairy tale — that is not couched in the diction of modern materialistic science, with a show of concern for verified credibilities. Probably, in most cases, they would like and praise the very stories that they condemn if the writer had used a different terminology, and had offered explanations that were even superficially logical according to known laws.

Please do not think that I am decrying, or even criticizing, Science Fiction I consider it a highly important and significant branch of present-day writing, and have hopes of contributing to it myself. I am merely advocating an attitude of mind and imagination. For those who think that the “impossible” requires justification — I would suggest that the only impossible thing is to define and de-limit the impossible. In an infinite, eternal universe, there is nothing imaginable — or unimaginable — which might not happen, might not be true, somewhere or sometime. Science has discovered, and will continue to discover, an enormous amount of relative data; but there will always remain an illimitable residue of the undiscovered and the unknown. And the field for imaginative fiction, both scientific and non-scientific, is, it seems to me, wholly inexhaustible.

On Garbage-Mongering



I SHOULD LIKE to say a few words anent one or two points which P. Schuyler Miller raises in his interesting letter in the June *Wonder Stories*.

Personally, I cannot see that science fiction is, as he puts it, is “unfortunately limited” in its range of expression. At least, I do not think that a type of literature so avowedly imaginative would benefit materially by invading, as so much modern fiction has done, the field of clinical analysis and sex-physiology. That sort of thing has been done *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseum* by non-imaginative writers, such as are favored by the professional “intelligentsia” of our sex-demented republic; and one of the most refreshing things about science fiction, and fantastic fiction in general, is the avoidance of such triteness.

To me, the best, if not the only function of imaginative writing, is to lead the human imagination *outward*, to take it into the vast external cosmos, and *away* from all that introversion and introspection, that morbidly exaggerated prying into one’s own vitals — and the vitals of others — which Robinson Jeffers has so aptly symbolized as “incest.” What we need is less “human interest,” in the narrow sense of the term — not more. Physiological — and even psychological analysis — can be largely left to the writers of scientific monographs on such themes. Fiction, as I see it, is not the place for that sort of grubbing.

Certainly I do not think that H. C. Wells, in the tedious analytic novels of his later phase, would be a good model for an imaginative writer. Wells, in his earlier years, wrote some marvelous fantasies. But afterwards, he was more and more seduced into sociology, psychoanalysis, etc., etc., till his

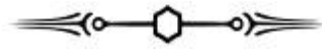
stories became a truly awful example of everything that fiction should not be. No doubt, they are excellent treatises, but as tales they are simply unreadable.

What science fiction chiefly needs, I should say, is a rigorous raising of literary standards, an insistence on good English as opposed to the jargon of magazine hackwriting. Form and finish are all too often lacking in stories otherwise excellent.

As to gaining the recognition of the “highbrows” — well, I hope that science fiction will never gain it. If the winning of this guerdon must involve an emulation of the squalors and tediums, the highbrow pornography and general garbage-mongering of the current school of realistic novelists.

Re the celebrated strictures of one Mr. Schwartz, it appears to me that they hardly need refuting, since they are patently ridiculous. “Slack-mouthed” youths and mental subnormals in general are not likely to be interested in either science or imagination, such as is purveyed by *Wonder Stories* and other magazines of the same type.

Fantasy and Human Experience



I SHOULD LIKE to point out a few considerations which, apparently, have been overlooked by Mr. Julian Gray in his thoughtful and well-written criticism of science fiction in the letter columns of the June *Amazing Stories*.

To begin with, it seems to me that his definition of literature as being exclusively a study of human reactions and character-development is rather narrow and limited. Literature can be, and does, many things; and one of its most glorious prerogatives is the exercise of imagination on things that lie *beyond* human experience — the adventuring of fantasy into the awful, sublime and infinite cosmos *outside* the human aquarium. In this genre, of which science fiction is one branch, the main interest lies in other elements than mere character-reaction and development, such as would properly be emphasized in a tale of ordinary events and conditions.

Of course, science-fiction can, has been, and will be written with a close attention to verisimilitude in such matters. But for the initiate in this type of fiction, and highly imaginative and fantastic fiction in general, the real thrill comes from the description of the *ultrahuman* events, forces and scenes, which properly dwarf the terrene actors to comparative insignificance. For many people — probably more than Mr. Gray realizes — imaginative stories offer a welcome and salutary release from the somewhat oppressive tyranny of the homocentric, and help to correct the deeply introverted, ingrowing values that are fostered by present-day “humanism” and realistic literature with its unhealthy materialism and earth-bound trend. Science fiction, at its best, is akin to sublime and exalted poetry, in its evocation of

tremendous, non-anthropomorphic imageries. To demand in such tales the intensive earthly observation of a hardy is idle and beside the point; and one who approaches them from this angle will miss the true value and beauty.

It seems to me, too, that Mr. Gray makes a pretty sweeping statement in Ills remarks about science fiction authors. Doubtless there are hacks in this branch of writing, as in all others; but, on the other hand, there are sincere imaginative artists. One only has to Willie A. Merritt (at least in his earlier work, such as the original novelette version of “The Moon Pool”), Stanton Coblenz, who has written some gorgeous fantastic satires, John Tame, a master of authentic science, and H. P. Lovecraft, whose “The Color Out of Space” goes infinitely beyond anything of H. G. Wells in its sheer imaginative scope and creation of atmosphere. To say that science fiction writers are “men of doubtful education and still more doubtful intelligence” because they prefer imaginative happenings, cosmic forces, atmosphere, etc., to psychological analysis, is an utterly pointless and senseless statement. But, since there is a fixed gulf, wider and deeper than Erebus, between imaginative people and those who lack imagination, it is no doubt equally senseless to argue this question.

Certainly, however, one must admit that there is vast room for improvement in the general body of science-fiction. This improvement, it seems to me, could lie in the direction of more skilful and finished writing, the exclusion of the trite and overworked, and the elimination of many stories which, on close analysis, are revealed as mere gangster tales or ordinary adventure stories with a futuristic or ultra-planetary setting. A few editorial measures of this sort would go far to remove the reproach which can justly be brought against science-fiction magazines. As a well-wisher, a reader — and also a writer of this genre — I sincerely hope that such an improvement will in time be brought about.

There is one other matter that I should like to touch upon. Mr. Gray's preliminary remarks about the general development of literature. To judge from these, one would think that the world's literature is marked off in perfectly distinct, geological strata! and that all the former, more primitive layers are now hermetically sealed beneath a deep and solid stratum of realism. This, however, is not the case. Romanticism, both in novels and short magazine stories, is still the most popular and widely read genre; and as for the supernatural, which Mr. Gray puts at the Archean bottom — well, even that despised branch of literary endeavor is having its innings, both with writers and readers. Apart from folk-lore, the literature of the supernatural is almost a modern invention anyway; and some of the best work in that genre is being done at the present time. Realism, even though it is the only form favored by the alleged "quality magazines" and the self-appointed critical pontiffs, certainly doesn't have the field to itself. And I think one can safely predict that it never will. The intolerable conditions of modern life and mechanistic civilization, will, one thinks, be more and more conducive to the development of a literature of imaginative "escape."

There is still another angle which occurs to me, *apropos* of Mr. Gray's letter. After all, why shouldn't literature, or at least one literary genre, emphasize what he calls the "inhuman," which, more properly, is the non-human or extra-human? Isn't it only the damnable, preposterous and pernicious egomania of the race, which refuses to admit anything but man's own feelings, desires, aims and actions as worthy of consideration?

This egomania, alas! is manifested in other ways than through literature, and lies at the bottom of that ruthless aggrandization, that maltreatment of weaker life-forms, that presumptuous meddling with the delicate balance of planetary forces, which may sweep our present-day civilization into the limbo of the dinosaurs. I fear that many super-scientific tales, which depict

a world-wide catastrophe as the result of human meddling with nature, may prove to be all too prophetic. Any type of writing that would serve even in the smallest degree as a brake on the madly careening wheels of this racial egomania, is, it seems to me, more than praiseworthy from a moral standpoint if from none other.

Clark Ashton Smith
Auburn, California

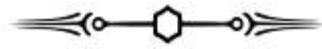
P.S. On re-reading Mr. Gray's letter, I find that I have forgotten to mention the matter of H. G. Wells, which he brings up. Doubtless it is the particular trend of Wells' mental development that has led him, in later years, to abandon the writing of science fiction for that of sociological novels. Wells, when he wrote the marvelous "Time Machine," "The War of the Worlds," and other fine fantasies, had in him much of the artist, perhaps a little of the poet. These, however, have been progressively smothered and drowned out by the growth of the pedagogue, the utilitarian "humanist."

As to Aldous Huxley, I have not read his "Brave New World," which, I should judge from reviews, is marked by the same congenital pornography as Huxley's ordinary novels. Satire, of course, is a well-recognized function of much science fiction, and perhaps some of it has been a little too subtle for Mr. Gray's apprehension. He seems to have missed Stanton Coblenz, of whom I have already spoken. If I cared to, I could name others in whom the satire is even more subtle and implicit.

If Mr. Gray should find my language somewhat violently polemical in places, he must realize that I have merely availed myself of that parliamentary privilege which he, in his own letter, has already avowedly pre-empted.

In conclusion, let me recommend to Mr. Gray, and to others who are similarly minded, the perusal of imaginative fiction for what it really is rather than for what it isn't. Also, he should realize that there are intelligent (and not necessarily immature) people who have the courage to dissent from the limited and grossly materialistic definition of literature which he has laid down, and who, moreover, are not overawed by the burden of present-day authority.

The Tale of Macrocosmic Horror



I HAVE READ with much interest the fine letter from A. Lewis in the “Cauldron.”

Mr. Lewis, in laying down rules for the development of the weird tale, has presented a viewpoint which will no doubt seem impregnable to the average intelligent person, in whom exclusively humanistic values of thought have been inculcated.

At the same time, however, I should like to indicate certain weaknesses and limitations which I see in this viewpoint, especially in regard to the tale of macrocosmic horror and fantasy. This type of story, because of its very character and purpose, should not, it seems to me, be bound strictly by “the practical requisites of literature in general.” In a tale of the highest imaginative horror, the main object is the creation of a supernatural, extra-human atmosphere; the real actors are the terrible arcanic forces, the esoteric cosmic malignities; and the element of human character, if one is to achieve the highest, most objective artistry, is properly somewhat subordinated in a tale of ordinary and natural happenings. One is depicting things, powers and conditions that are beyond humanity; therefore, artistically speaking, the main accent is on these things, powers and conditions.

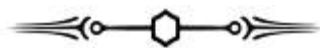
A sense of the superhuman is to be conveyed; therefore one does not want the human — at least, not to an extent that would impair and detract from the proper focus of interest. For this reason, I fear that the weird tale, if written mainly as psychological analysis, would tend to forfeit some of its highest and rarest values. Modern literature has become so thoroughly

subjective, so introverted in its tendencies, so preoccupied with the anthropocentric, that it seems desirable for one genre, at least, to maintain what one might call a centrifugal impetus, to make “a gesture toward the infinite” rather than toward the human intestines

This is not saying that Weird Fiction would not gain by more verisimilitude in the presentation of its terrene actors. But their reactions can be indicated more succinctly, with more stress on events, outward forces and atmosphere, than in fiction dealing with the natural and the normal.

For instance, let us take some concrete examples from modern Weird Fiction. In authors such as Algernon Blackwood and Walter de la Mare, it seems to me that the accent is primarily on human character. But in their work (at least, in any of it that I have read) one fails to find the highest imaginative horror, the overwhelming sweep of black, gulf-arisen wings, such as is conveyed in the best tales of Ambrose Bierce, Poe and H. P. Lovecraft, where human character is treated more briefly and subversively.

Realism and Fantasy



MR. MILLER'S VERY able and urbane letter in the December issue makes me feel that my own recent letter on the problem of realism versus fantasy might be supplemented and qualified by a few remarks.

First of all, it should not be inferred that I have the least desire to prescribe limits for the development of science fiction or any form of fiction. On the contrary, I believe that all possibilities should be sounded and explored. When I decried realism in my letter, I was inveighing mainly against what I see as the limiting and sterilizing influence of a too slavish, uninspired literalism in modern writing. It did not, and does not, seem to me that science fiction would benefit by the adopting of such fetters — or, to vary the image, a clipping of the eagle's wings to a conformity with those of the barnyard fowl. Such literalism, as in the case of Zola, is the most quickly outmoded of literary forms. On the other hand, I do not think that the genuine, imaginative realism of Hardy, including an ever-present apprehension of the cosmic mysteries and fatalities that environ life, will ever be outmoded.

Also, in my letter, as Mr. Miller implies, I was considering ultimate artistic values, and not the question of expediency. Undoubtedly the realistic wave is entering science fiction, and the trend will have to work itself out. Like all other trends, it has both good and evil possibilities. I have merely tried to warn against the evil ones. The best possibilities lie in the correlation of observed data about life and human problems with inspired speculation as to the unknown forces of cosmic cause and effect that undoubtedly surround and play upon life. The evil lies in a meaningless

Dreiserism, an inartistic heaping of superficial facts or alleged facts, which, after all, through our perceptual limitations, may be erroneous, or, at least, too incomplete to permit the safe drawing of dogmatic inference.

Tomorrow, the accepted theories of science and human psychology may be superceded by a brand-new lot; and it is partly because of this shifting, unstable ground on which the thing called realism stands, that I regard pure, frank fantasy as a more valid and lasting art-expression of the human mind.

In one sense, fantasy of one kind or another is about all that is possible for us, handicapped as we are by a partial and lopsided sense-equipment, and occupying a highly precarious position amid infinities and eternities whose concerns are perhaps wholly alien to our welfare or comprehension. Any true realism, it seems to me, must include a facing of this position, and not a treatment of life as if it were an air-tight compartment shut off from the unknown cosmos, and complete and independent in itself.

Mr. Miller's definition of the three main stages in literary evolution is well-drawn, I think. It may interest him, and others, to know that my own final preference for fantasy was reached through a varied course of reading that followed pretty much the outlines he has indicated. I began with children's fairy tales, went on through Haggard, Kipling, Balzac, Flaubert, France, etc. But through it all I have kept a profound admiration for Poe. My present enthusiasms include Blackwood, Lovecraft, John Tame, Machen, etc. — and, of course, Dunsany. I have also succumbed to the pervasive charm of Merritt.

To go back to the matter of realism, as an expedient for the furthering of science fiction, I must admit that I will not quarrel with Mr. Miller's viewpoint. And most assuredly I will not fling any stones or bouquets of asparagus at fellow-scribes who can win the attention of the main-guard of

criticism. More power to them, if they can. I reserve the right to join the fray myself.

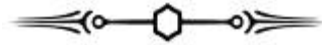
I am going to make a suggestion, which is, that the treatment of human “realities” through imaginative satire could well play an extensive part, as a corollary of this development. Perhaps, just as the present time, it would be more valuable than stuff done in the Hemingway vein. It could conceivably reach, I am sure, a large and receptive audience. We are badly in need of a new Swift, who could write the *Gulliver’s Travels* of current folly, corruption, dullness and madness. Stanton Coblenz has done some fine things of this type; but there are vast, unsounded possibilities.

I feel like a Time Traveler, after reading Mr. Miller’s quite flattering classification of my own work as being ahead of the age! Howbeit, perhaps I am merely one of those unfortunate and perverse individuals who are constitutionally “against the Government.” When fantasy is acclaimed by Irving Babbitt, and is published regularly in *Harpers* and *The American Mercury*, I may take refuge in the writing of case-histories! That is to say, if I have not emigrated to the Abbey of Thelema or gone to Mohammed’s paradise in the meanwhile. Literature is a grand old merry-go-round, and like the serpent of eternity, it always has its tail in its mouth. Also, as Mr. Miller hints, there may be some additional hoops in the ringsnake.

My apologies for pious metaphors; also for the Einsteinian liberties I have taken with Mr. Miller’s curve.

The Validity of Weird Stories

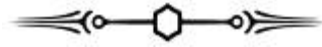
A letter from Clark Ashton Smith contains an interesting thumbnail essay on the validity of weird stories, which we are passing on to you. Mr. Smith's comments are valuable, as he is one of the great masters of the weird tale — a classification which includes H. P. Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and one or two others.



MR. SMITH WRITES: "It seems to me that the real validity and value of weird, imaginative literature has never been sufficiently affirmed. In these days, when the burden of critical so-called authority is cast almost wholly on the side of the so-called 'realism,' it might be especially pertinent to point out one or two considerations. Weird, fantastic writing, by its emphasis of the envioning cosmic wonder and mystery of things, may actually be truer to the spirit of life than the work which merely concerns itself with literalities, as most modern fiction does. Only a dullard, it seems to me, would despise and decry fantasy on the oft-alleged score of superficiality or remoteness. If anything is superficial, it is the grossly external and factitious realism of the modernists, who, abnegating the one gill, that raises man above the other animals, can see nothing but the bare physical facts of existence. Whether or not one believes in the 'supernatural,' it seems to me that the infinite eery mystery that presses upon us is an ineluctable thing that can not be dissipated by test-tubes or Freudian analysis. Also, in spite of those who would limit literature to psychographs and genre studies, it will always afford a fascinating and inexhaustible field for the human imagination."

Horror, Fantasy and Science

The Boiling Point



ONLY THE HOTTEST of controversies will be printed in this column — radical arguments that will bring your blood to “The Boiling Point.” We start this department off by presenting one of the most blasphemous articles it has been our pleasure to read. It is by Forrest J. Ackerman, and he calls it

A Quarrel with No doubt this will be the commencement of a lively discussion between the readers. It is the editor’s intention to print the most interesting arguments on both sides of the case. I have this to say: it seems to me that *Wonder Stories* is going far afield when it takes such a horror story as Mr. Smith’s “Dweller in Martian Depths” and, because it is laid on the Red Planet, prints it in a magazine of scientific fiction. Frankly, I could not find one redeeming feature about the story. Of course, everything doesn’t have to have a moral. The thrilling scientifilm, “King Kong,” for instance, has no moral to it — except, perhaps, to be careful of Fay Wray, if you are a great prehistoric ape — but it has a point at least: to interest. And “Dweller in Martian Depths” didn’t interest me. I don’t know, maybe it did others. But it disappointed me very greatly to find it in a scientifiction publication. In *Weird Tales*, all right. I don’t like that type of story, I wouldn’t read it there. I fail to find anything worth-while in an endless procession of ethereal lites, phantastic visions, ultra-mundane life, exotic paradises, airy vegetation, whispering flutes, ghastly plants, and dirge-like horrors. May the ink dry up in the pen from which they flow! Or, at least, Mr. Smith, direct those tales elsewhere — NOT to a stf publication, because

I do like your science fiction like “Master of the Asteroid” and “Flight into Super Time.” But “stuff” like “The Light from Beyond”

Well, let’s hear from someone in favor.

Make “The Boiling Point” boil, you indignant fans. Don’t let this guy Ackerman get away with it. Your replies will be published in this department. We would especially appreciate a reply from Mr. Smith himself in defense of his stories.

The Fantasy Fan, “The Boiling Point,” September, 1933.

The Boiling Point

You will remember the terrific outburst Forrest J. Ackerman made upon Clark Ashton Smith’s stories and weird tales in general in last month’s column. Shortly after the issue went to press, we received the following postscript to his article which he requested to have printed at the beginning of this month’s column.

I could as well pick on John Tame — a favorite author, mind you — for “The Time Machine” in *Wonder Stories*, another story considered doubtful science fiction. My only interest is to keep stf. in the stf. publications, and let fantasies and weird tales appear in the magazines featuring that type.

It is to be hoped that Mr. Smith will discover many of his admirers thru the writings of readers caring to present arguments.

It is only fair that Mr. Smith himself should have the first blow against Mr. Ackerman’s argument, in defense of his own stories, lie calls (it)

Horror, Fantasy, and Science

Mr. Ackerman’s fervent and ebullient denunciation of my stories, followed by Editor Hornig’s invitation to join the melee, is not to be resisted.

I infer that Forrest J. Ackerman considers horror, weirdness and unearthliness beyond the bounds of science or science fiction. Since horror and weirdness are integral parts of life (as is well known to those Who have delved beneath the surface) and since, in all likelihood, the major portion of the universe is quite unearthly, I fail to understand the process of logic or syllogism by which he has arrived at this truly amazing proscription.

Let me recommend to Mr. Ackerman, and to others like him, a more scientifically open and receptive attitude of imagination. If Mr. Ackerman were transported to some alien world, I fear that he would find the reality far more incredible, bizarre, grotesque, fantastic, horrific, and impossible than any of my stories.

In regard to “The Light From Beyond,” I cannot see that this tale is any more fantastic and unreal than others dealing with unknown dimensions or planes of hyper-space. Physical entry into such planes is impossible, but form an alluring theme for fictional speculation.

It is curious that Mr. Ackerman should profess to like ‘Flight Into Super Time,’ a story which is wilder, if anything, than the ones he has denounced. I might also add that it was written as a satire on time-travelling, and should not have been read too seriously.

Of course, it is Forrest Ackerman’s privilege to dislike my stories, and to express his dislike whenever he chooses. I have merely tried to point out that he is in error when he condemns them as being inherently unsuitable for a scientifiction magazine.

At this point editor Charles Hornig printed part of a letter from H. P. Lovecraft in which Lovecraft defended CAS, saying that “Dweller in Martian Depths” was “really splendid, except for the cheap ending on which the Editor of *Wonder Stories* insisted.”

The Fantasy Fan, “The Boiling Point,” October, 1933.

Lovecraft also wrote in the November 1933 issue of Fantasy Fan ("The Boiling Point"), bitterly denouncing Forrest J. Ackerman. In the December 1933 and again in the January 1934 issues Ackerman responded, directing his attack not so much at CAS but rather at Lovecraft. Both Lovecraft's and Ackerman's letters contained rather personal attacks on each other.

In his January, 1934 letter, however, Ackerman did go so far as to say that since Weird Tales occasionally published science fiction, perhaps Wonder Stories should be allowed to publish weird tales. Also in December, 1933, was a letter from Donald Alexander in which he attacked CAS and Lovecraft for "descending to personalities" and concluded that "Smith, in my opinion, is a poor writer. His stories are all like the ravings of some fearfully diseased mind."

In the January 1934 issue Lovecraft again answered Ackerman by reminding him that his original attack on "Dweller in Martian Depths" was not based on whether or not the story was suitable for a science fiction magazine, but rather was an attack on the story itself.

Editor Hornig at this point decided the debate had gone far enough and was perhaps threatening to get out of hand; he served notice that the issue would be dropped after the February issue of FANTASY FAN. In that February issue, CAS — who had remained out of the most acrimonious part of the debate — published a letter concerning Donald Alexander's charges.

Donald Alexander's letter caused me to reread carefully my own answer to Forrest Ackerman's epistolary critique. Since my one concern was to meet Mr. Ackerman's arguments on their own ground, I am puzzled by the assertion of Mr. Alexander that I made a fool of myself by descending to personalities. Off hand, I should have said that my letter was about as free of that sort of thing as it could conceivably have been. Perhaps there were a few mildly ironic touches; but certainly nothing of an insidious nature was

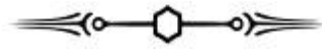
implied or even intended. I do not think that any good purpose is ever served by abusive personalities. If my letter was derogatively personal, I really wonder how Mr. Alexander's should be classified.

In the same issue was a brief note from August Derleth saying he was "squarely on Smith's side." The debate concluded with this note from Editor Charles Hornig:

We stated last month that the Smith-Ackerman debate would end in this issue-and so it has. Many of our readers have started to get bored with it — and more than that, some ill — feeling has been aroused.

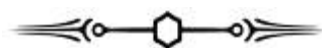
The Fantasy Fan is attempting to bind the lovers of science and weird fiction tighter together with friendship, and not to separate them thru dislike of each other's ideas, however, to take the place of "The Boiling Point" we are starting a new department next month entitled "Your Views." This will not contain any debates, but the opinions of you, the readers, on various subjects we will nominate.

On the Forbidden Books



“NECRONOMICON,” “BOOK OF Eibon” etc I am sorry to say, are all fictitious. Lovecraft invented the first, I the second. Howard, I believe, fathered the German work on the Nameless Cults. It is really too bad that they don’t exist as objective, bonafide compilations of the elder and darker Lore! I have been trying to remedy this, in some small measure, by cooking up a whole chapter of Eibon. It is still unfinished, and I am now entitling it “The Coming of the White Worm.”... This worm mentioned in Eibon is Rlim Shaikorth, and comes from beyond the pole on a strange, gigantic iceberg with a temperature of absolute zero.

The Weird Works of M. R. James



THE FOUR BOOKS of short stories written by Montague Rhodes James, Provost of Eton College, have been collected in a single but not overly bulky volume under the imprint of Longmans, Green & Co. One can heartily recommend the acquisition of this volume to all lovers of the weird and supernatural who are not already familiar with its contents.

James is perhaps unsurpassed in originality by any living writer: and he has made a salient contribution to the technique of the genre as well as to the enriching of its treasury of permanent masterpieces. His work is marked by rare intellectual skill and ingenuity, by power rising at times above the reaches of pure intellection, and by a sheer finesse of writing that will bear almost endless study. It has a peculiar savour, wholly different from the diabolic grimness of Bierce, or the accumulative atmospheric terror and rounded classicism of Machen. Here there is nothing of the feverish but logical hallucinations, the macabre and exotic beauty achieved by Poe; nor is there any kinship to the fine poetic weavings and character *nuances* of Walter de la Mare, or the far-searching, penetrative psychism of Blackwood, or the frightful antiquities and ultra-terrene menaces of Lovecraft.

The style of these stories is rather casual and succinct. The rhythms of the prose are brisk and pedestrian, and the phrasing is notable for clearness and incisiveness rather than for those vague, reverberative overtones which beguile one's inner ear in the prose of fiction-writers who are also poets. Usually there is a more or less homely setting, often with a background of folklore and long — past happenings whose dim archaism provides a depth

of shadow from which, as from a recessed cavern, the central horror emerges into the noontide of the present. Things and occurrences, sometimes with obvious off-hand relationship, are grouped cunningly, forcing the reader unaware to some frightful deduction; or there is an artful linkage of events seemingly harmless in themselves, that leave him confronted at a sudden turn with some ghoulish specter or night-demon.

The minutæ of modern life, humor, character — drawing, scenic and archaeological description, are used as a foil to heighten the abnormal, but are never allowed to usurp a disproportionate interest. Always there is an element of supernatural menace, whose value is never impaired by scientific or spiritualistic explanation. Sometimes it is brought forth at the climax into full light; and sometimes, even then, it is merely half-revealed, is left undefined but perhaps all the more alarming. In any case, the presence of some unnatural but objective reality is assumed and established.

The goblins and phantoms devised by James are truly creative and are presented through images often so keen and vivid as to evoke an actual physical shock. Sight, smell, hearing, tacton, all are played upon with well-nigh surgical sureness, by impressions calculated to touch the shuddering quick of horror.

Some of the images or similes employed are most extraordinary, and spring surely from the daemonic inspiration of the highest genius. For instance, take the unnamable thing in *The Uncommon Prayer Book*, which resembles “a great roll of old, shabby, white flannel,” with a kind of face in the upper end, and which falls forward on a man’s shoulder and hides this face in his neck like a ferret attacking a rabbit. Then, in *Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance* (one of subtler and more inferential tales) there is the form “with a burnt human face” and “black arms,” that emerges from an inexplicable hole in the paper plan of a garden maze “with the odious

writhings of a wasp creeping out of a rotten apple.” In *The Tractate Middoth* one meets an apparition with thick cobwebs over its eyes — the lich or specter of a man who, obedient to his own rather eccentric instructions, had been buried sitting at a table in an underground room. And who, upon reading *The Diary of Mr. Poynter*, can fail to share Denton’s revulsion when he reaches out, thinking that a dog is beside his chair, and touches a crawling figure covered with long, wavy, Absalom-like tresses? Who, too, can shake off the horror of Dennistoun, in *Canon Alberic’s Scrap Book*, when a demon’s hand appears from beneath on the table, suggesting momentarily a pen-wiper, a rat, and a large spider?

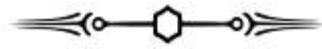
Reading and re-reading these tales, one notes a predilection for certain milieus and motifs. Backgrounds of scholastic or ecclesiastic life are frequent and some of the best tales are laid in cathedral towns. In many of the supernatural entities, there recurs insistently the character of extreme and repulsive *hairiness*. Often the apparition is connected with, or evoked by, some material object, such as the bronze whistle from the ruins of a Templars’ preceptory in *Oh, Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad*; the old drawing of King Solomon and the night-demon in *Canon Alberic’s Scrap Book*; the silver Anglo-Saxon crown from an immemorial barrow in *A Warning to the Curious*; and the strange curtain-pattern in *The Diary of Mr. Poynter* which had “a subtlety in its drawing.”

In several stories there are hints of bygone Satanism and wizardry whose malign wraiths or conjured spirits linger obscurely in modern time; and in at least one tale, *Casting the Runes*, the warlock is a living figure. In other tales, the forgetful and vanishing phantasms of old crimes cry out their mindless pain, or peer for an instant from familiar pools and shrubberies. The personnel of James’ *Pandemonium* is far from monotonous; one finds a satyr dwelling in a cathedral tomb; a carven cat-like monster that comes to

life when touched by a murderer's hand; a mouldy smelling sack-like object in an unlit well, which suddenly puts its arms around the neck of a treasure-seeker; a cloaked and hooded shape with a tentacle in lieu of arms; a lean, hideously taloned terror, with a jaw "shallow as that of a beast"; dolls that repeat crime and tragedy; creatures that are dog-like but are not dogs; a saw fly tall as a man, met in a dim room full of rustling insects; and even a weak, ancient thing, which being wholly bodiless and insubstantial, makes for itself a body out of crumpled bed-linen.

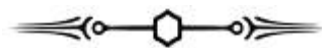
The peculiar genius of M. R. James, and his greatest power, lies in the convincing evocation of weird, malignant and preternatural phenomena such as I have instanced. It is safe to say that few writers, dead or living, have equalled him in this formidable necromancy and perhaps no one has excelled him.

The Psychology of the Horror Story



MR. LOVECRAFT HAS stated very lucidly and succinctly the essential value and validity of the horror story as literary art, and there is no need to recapitulate his conclusions. It has often occurred to me that the interest in tales of horror and weirdness is a manifestation of the adventure impulse so thoroughly curbed in most of us by physical circumstances. In particular, it evinces a desire — perhaps a deep-lying spiritual need — to transcend the common limitations of time, space, and matter. It might be argued that this craving is not, as many shallow modernists suppose, a desire to escape from reality, but an impulse to penetrate the verities which lie beneath the surface of things; to grapple with, and to dominate, the awful mysteries of mortal existence. The attitude of those who would reprehend a liking for horror and eeriness and would dismiss it as morbid and unhealthy, is simply ludicrous. The true morbidity, the true unhealthiness, lies on the other side.

The Family Tree of the Gods



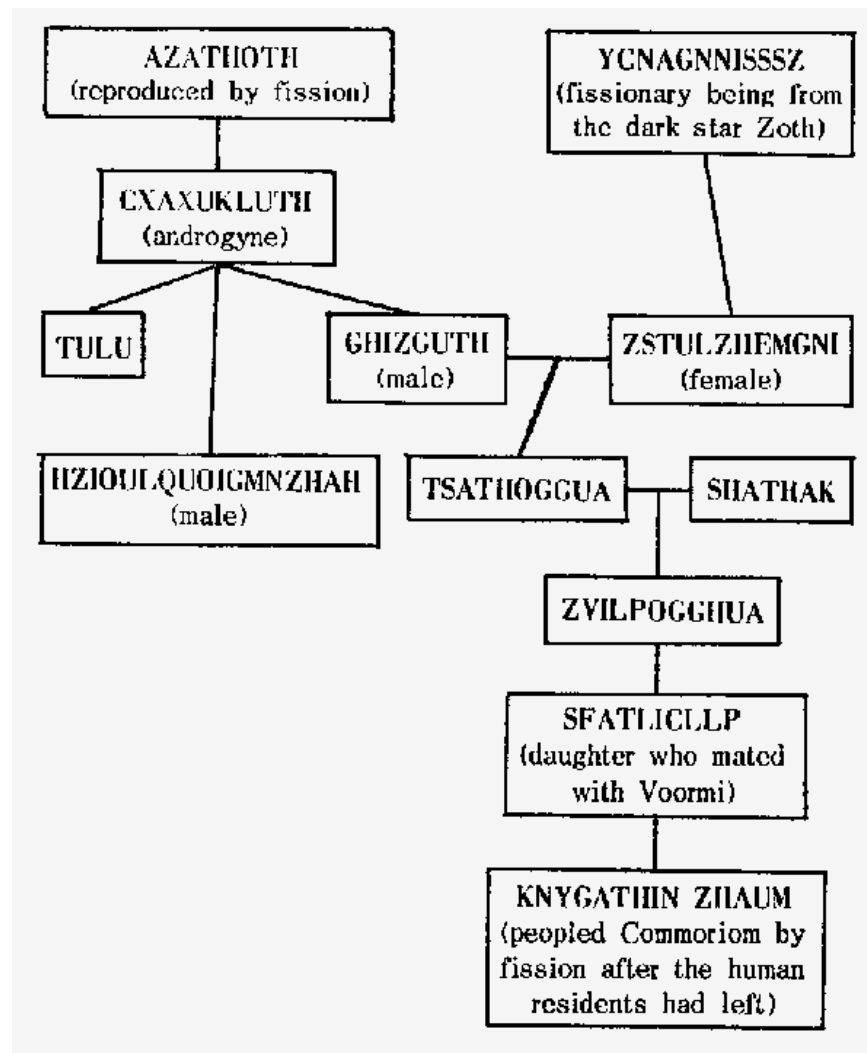
I HAVE FILLED out the “style-sheet” with such annotations and details concerning Tsathoggua as I am at present able to furnish. Some of these have required considerable delving into the *Parchments of Pnom* (who was the chief genealogist as well as a noted prophet) and I am well aware that certain of my phonetic renderings from the *Elder Script* are debatable. You raise some interesting points with your questions. Azathoth, the primal nuclear chaos, reproduced of course only by fission; but its progeny, entering various outer planets, often took on attributes of androgynism or bisexuality. The androgynes, curiously, required no coadjutancy in the production of offspring; but their children were commonly unisexual, male or female. Hzioulquoigmzhah, uncle of Tsathoggua, and Ghizghuth, Tsathoggua’s father, were the male progeny of Cxaxukluth, the androgynous spawn of Azathoth. Thus you will note a trend toward biological complexity. It is worthy of record, however, that Knygathin Zhaum, the half-breed Voormi, reverted to the most primitive Azathothian characteristics following the stress of his numerous decapitations. I have yet to translate the terrible and abominable legend telling how a certain doughty citizen of Comnioriom (not Athammaus) returned to the city after its public evacuation, and found that it was peopled most execrably and numerously by the fissional spawn of Knygathin Zhaum, which possessed no vestige of anything human or even earthly.

Ech-Pi-El, I am sure, can furnish much fuller data concerning the genesis of Tulu (Cthulhu) than I am able to offer. It would seem, from the rather oblique references of Pnom, that Tulu was a cousin of Hzioulquoigmzhah,

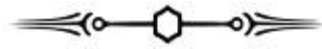
but was somewhat closer to the Azathothian archetype than Hzioulquoigmnzhah. The latter god, I learn, together with Ghisghuth, was horn of Cxnxukluth in a far system. Cxaxukluth came *en famille* (family already included Ghisguth's wife, Zstylzhemgni, and the infant Tsathoggua) to Yuggoth (where, I may add, Cxaxukluth has most mercifully continued to sojourn throughout the aeons). Hzioulquoigmnzhah, who found its parent slightly uncongenial owing to its cannibalistic habits, emigrated to Yaksh (Neptune) at an early age; but, wearying of the peculiar religious devotions of the Yakshians, went on to Cykranosh, in which he preceded by several aeons his nephew Tsathoggua. (Tsathoggua, with his parents, lingered a long while in Yuggoth, having penetrated certain central caverns beyond the depredations of Cxaxukluth.) Hzioulquoigmnzh, a rather reflective and philosophic deity, was long worshipped by the quaint peoples of Cykranosh but grew tired of them even as of the Yakshians; and he had permanently retired from active life at the time of his encounter with Eibon as relatec in *The Door To Saturn*. No doubt he still resides in the columned cavern, and still quenches his thirst at the lake of liquid metal — a confirmed bachelor, and *sans* offspring.

My account of Tsathoggua's advent can readily be reconciled with the references in *The Mound*. Tsathoggua, travelling through another dimension than the familiar three, first entered the Earth by means of the lightless inner Gulf of N'Kai; and he lingered there for cycles, during which his ultraterrestrial origin was not suspected. Later, he established himself in caverns nearer to the surface, and his cult thrived; but after the coming of the ice he returned to N'Kai. Thereafter, much of his legend was forgotten or misunderstood by the dwellers in the red-litten Caverns of Yoth and blue-litten Caverns of K'n-Yan. Through such mythopoetic variations, Gil'-Hathaa-Ynn came to tell the Spaniard Zamarcoma that only the images of

Tsathoggua, and not Tsathoggua himself, had emerged from the inner world...

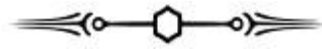


Clark Ashton Smith: An Autobiographette



I AM INCLINED to think that my life is a pretty good exemplification of the theories propounded by Lester Anderson in his interesting and provocative article on Superstition. Anyhow, I was born on Friday the 13th, under Capricornus and Saturn, and have been flirting with most of the orthodox jinxes ever since. I do not whistle in the dark, I have never gone in for Dream Books or psychoanalysis, and I make a habit of walking under ladders when it is more convenient to do this than circumambulate the obstruction. As to black cats — well, I have owned one for many years — a most sinister-looking creature, with all the aspects of an old-time wizard's familiar. Perhaps all this may help to explain the kumiss in the cocoanut, and may account for my ability to peruse the most horrendous stuff without batting an eyelash. Also (since there are modern superstitions as well as ancient ones) it may throw a light on my complete lack of faith in the Five year plan, EPIC, and all other cockeyed Utopian schemes. Moreover, it may help to explain my open mind in regard to all *outré* and inexplicable phenomena, and the fact that I can take the theories of Einstein, as well as of modern science in general, with a salutary pinch of saline seasoning.

On Fantasy



WE HAVE BEEN told that literature dealing with the imaginative and fantastic is out of favour among the Intellectuals, whoever they are. Only the Real, whatever that is or may be, is admissible for treatment; and writers must confine themselves to themes well within the range of statisticians, lightning calculators, Freud and Kraft-Ebbing, the Hearst and McFadden publications, NRA, and mail-order catalogues. Chimeras are no longer the mode, the infinite has been abolished; mystery is obsolete, and sphinx and medusa are toys for children. The weird and the unearthly are outlawed, and all mundane impossibilities (which, it may be, are the commonplaces of the Pleinds) have been banished to some limbo of literalistic derision. One may write of horses and hippopotomi but not of hippogriffs; of biographers, but not of ghouls; of slum-harlots or the hetairae of Nob Hill but not of succubi. In short, all pipe-dreams, all fantasies not authorized by Freudianism, by sociology, and the five senses, are due for the critical horse-laugh, when, through ignorance, effrontery, or preference, they find a place in the subject matter of some author unlucky enough to have been born into the age of Jeffers, Hemingway, and Joyce.

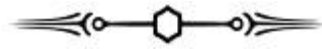
Let us examine these amazing dicta, fathered, as they must be, by people whose literal-mindedness can be surpassed only by that of their “four-footed betters.” Surely it is axiomatic that in thought or art we deal not with things themselves, but with concepts of things. One may write, like Villon, of Muelde Meg and the Fair Helm-Maker; or, like Sterling, evoke Lilith and the blue-eyed vampire: in either case, only figments of the poet’s mind are presented. It is for the creator, not the critic, to choose that image or symbol

which suits him best. People who cannot endure anything with a tinge of trope or fantasy, should confine their reading to the census-returns. There, if anywhere, they will find themselves on safe ground.

To touch on other considerations: why this thirst for literalism, for nothing but direct anthropological data, which would proscribe the infinitudes of imagination, would bar all that can lift us, even in thought, above the interests of the individual or the species? Does it not imply a cosmic provincialism, an overweening racial egomania?

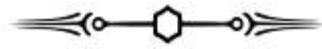
Indeed, if all things fantastic or impossible are to be barred as literary subject-matter, where is one to draw the line? Many thinkers who lived before Freud, and some who live contemporaneously with him, have maintained that the world itself is a fantasy; or, in De Casseres' phrase, a "superstition of the senses." Gautier has pointed out that we live only by illusion, by a process of seeing ourselves and all things as they are not. The animals alone, being without imagination, have no escape from reality. From paretic to psychoanalyst, from poet to rag-picker, we are all in flight from the real. Truth is what we desire it to be, and the facts of life are a masquerade in which we imagine that we have identified the maskers. The highest intellects have always delighted in poetic fancy and philosophic paradox, knowing well that the universe itself is multiform fantasy and paradox, and that everything perceived or conceived as actuality is merely one phase of that which has or may have innumerable aspects. In this phantom whirl of the infinite, among these veils of Maya that are sevenfold behind sevenfold, nothing is too absurd, too lovely, or dreadful to be impossible.

The Demonian Face



ABOUT 1918 I was in ill health and, during a short visit to San Francisco, was sitting one day in the Bohemian Club, to which I had been given a guest's card of admission. Happening to look up, I saw a frightful demonian face with twisted rootlike eyebrows and oblique fiery-slitted eyes, which seemed to emerge momentarily from the air about nine feet above me and lean toward my seat. The thing disappeared as it approached me, but left an ineffaceable impression of malignity, horror, and loathsomeness. If an hallucination, it was certainly seen amid appropriate surroundings; if an actual entity, it was no doubt the kind that would be likely to haunt a club in one of our modern Gomorrahs.

The Favorite Weird Stories of C. A. Smith



(COURTESY OF H. Koenig)

“The Yellow Sign” by Chambers

“The House of Sounds” by Shiel

“The Willows” by Blackwood

“A View from a Hill” by James

“The Death of Halpin Fraser” by Bierce

“The house of Usher” by Poe (i.e., “The Fall of the House of Usher”)

“The Masque of the Red Death” by Poe

“The White Powder” by Machen

“The Call of Cthulhu” by Lovecraft

“The Colour Out of Space” by Lovecraft

An Autobiography of I was born on January 13th, 1893, in Long Valley, California, of English and Yankee parentage. Most of my formal education was received at the little red schoolhouse of the precinct. As a schoolboy, I believe that I was distinguished more for devilment than scholarship. Much of my childhood was spent in the neighborhood of an alleged gold mine; which may be reason why the romance of California gold mining failed to get under my skin.

My first literary efforts, at the age of 11, took the form of fairy tales and imitations of the Arabian Nights. Later, I wrote long adventure novels dealing with Oriental life, and much mediocre verse. At 17, I sold several tales to *The Black Cat*, a magazine which specialized in yarns of the unusual. Then, for some reason, I lost interest in fiction-writing and

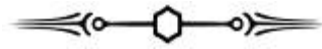
confined my efforts to poetry for more than a decade. A volume of verse, *The Star-Treader and Other Poems*, appeared at the end of my 19th year. A little later, my health broke down, and for ten years my literary production was more or less limited and intermittent. My best poetry, however, was written during this period. A small volume, *Odes and Sonnets*, was brought out by the Book Club of California in 1918. In 1922 I published *Ebony and Crystal*; in 1925, *Sandalwood*.

At the beginning of the Depression in 1929, I resumed fiction-writing and have since turned out more than a hundred short stories and novelettes, nearly all of which can be classed as weird or science fiction. Most of these tales have somehow gotten themselves into print. Six tales, *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies*, which I printed at my own expense, are among the best. Of the tales published in science fiction magazines, *The Eternal World* and *The City of the Singing Flame*, are in my opinion, the most outstanding.

Apart from writing, I have made hundreds of fantastic paintings and drawings; also, more than a hundred small sculptures and carvings of imaginative type. I find the making of these far easier and more pleasurable than writing.

My poems have appeared in 30 or more magazines, in 10 or 12 anthologies; and some have even been used in school readers. I have done a number of translations from French poetry, and have dabbled, rather ineptly no doubt, in the writing of French verse. Aside from the aforementioned arts and avocations, I have done, at times, much hard manual labor, such as wood-cutting and fruit picking. I have learned to cook, after a fashion, and have made many kinds of wine.

Story-Writing Hints



THE MAIN OBJECTIVE of the short story is to stir the reader's emotions. How you stir them or what emotion you stir is not so important as the fact that to hold the reader's interest you must stir his emotions. You must be able to create various emotional effects thru your characters, action, description, setting, etc.

Constant practice is the key to success. You cannot learn music without practicing it, neither can you learn to write without writing. I suggest that, for your own benefit, you write a few hundred words depicting an emotional experience. Write up one of your own experiences or invent one. But remember that you are writing it with the purpose of stirring an emotion in the person who reads it. The sketch is not to be a story but merely an incident-no opening explanations are necessary.

When you are reading a story watch for the passages in which the author is relating an emotional experience and inducing the emotional feeling in you. By studying how that particular author is doing it you will be better able to do it in your own work.

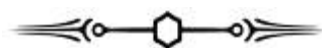
I believe that the following partial quotation from "The Double Shadow" will serve to illustrate the building up of emotional feeling:

... a second day has gone by like a sluggish ooze of horror... I have seen the... identification of the shadow with the flesh of Avyctes ... I have seen the slow encroachment of the... umbrage, mingling... with the lank shadow and... bituminous body of Oigos, and turning them to ... the thing which

Avyctes has become. And I have heard the mummy cry out like a living man in great pain and fear... And verily I know not if the thing that has come to us be one or several...

But these things ... I shall soon know; for now, in turn, there is a shadow that follows mine, drawing ever closer. The air congeals and curdles with an unseen fear... and the great marble women seem to tremble where they stand along the walls. But the horror that was Avyctes, and the second horror that was Oigos, have left me not... And their stillness is more terrible than if they had rended me limb from limb. And there are strange voices in the wind, and alien roarings upon the sea; and the walls quiver like a thin veil in the black breath of remote abysses.

In Appreciation of William Hope Hodgson



AMONG THOSE FICTION writers who have elected to deal with the shadowlands and borderlands of human existence, William Hope Hodgson surely merits a place with the very few that inform their treatment of such themes with a sense of authenticity. His writing itself, as Mr. Lovecraft justly says, is far from equal in stylistic merit: but it would be impossible to withhold the rank of master from an author who has achieved so authoritatively, in volume after volume, a quality that one might term the realism of the unreal. In some ways, Hodgson's work is no doubt most readily comparable to that of Algernon Blackwood. But I am not sure that even Blackwood has managed to intimate a feeling of such profound and pervasive familiarity with the occult as one finds in *The house on the Borderland*. Hideous phantoms and unknown monsters from the nightward gulf are adumbrated in all their terror, with no dispelling of their native mystery; and surely such things could be described only by a seer who has dwelt overlong on the perilous verges and has peered too deeply into the regions veiled by invisibility from normal sight.

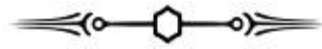
However, *The House on the Borderland*, though probably the most sustained and least faulty of Hodgson's volumes, is far from being his most unique achievement. In all literature, there are few works so sheerly remarkable, so purely creative, as *The Night Land*. Whatever faults this book may possess, however inordinate its length may seem, it impresses the reader as being the ultimate saga of a perishing cosmos, the last epic of a world beleaguered by eternal night and by the unvisageable spawn of darkness. Only a great poet could have conceived and written this story; and

it is perhaps not illegitimate to wonder how much of actual prophecy may have been mingled with the poesy.

The books above mentioned are, in my opinion, Mr. Hodgson's masterpieces. However, the first portion of *The Boats of the "Glen Carrig"* maintains a comparable level of imaginative power; and one regrets that the lost mariners should have escaped so soon from the malign and mysterious dimension into which they were carried. One must also accord a more than formal praise to *The Ghost Pirates*, which is really one of the few successful long stories dealing with the phantasmal. Its rout of ghastly and persistent specters will follow the reader long after they have seized the haunted ship!

It is to be hoped that work of such unusual power will eventually win the attention and fame to which it is entitled. Beyond doubt, accident and fatality play a large part in such matters; and many meritorious books and works of art are still shadowed in obscurity. Hodgson, though little known, is in good company. How many, even among fantasy lovers, have heard of the great imaginative artist, John Martin, or the equally great and macabre imaginative poet, Thomas Lovell Beddoes?

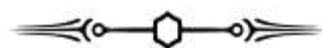
In Memoriam: H. P. Lovecraft



HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT passed away on March 15th, after a month of painful illness. His death will be a personal bereavement to all lovers of fine imaginative writing as well as to the friends who were privileged to know and esteem and love him. Among these friends must be counted many who never met him face to face, but who found in him the princeliest of all correspondents: a mind of unequalled brilliance and erudition, fired with manifold enthusiasms, given to the “noble pleasure” of praising where praise was in any wise due; a source of never-failing inspiration, illumination, generosity, helpfulness, enheartenment to others. The loss is profound and irreparable for us who remain behind: for it is safe to say that his peer will not be found again.

His published writings require no encomium, since they are familiar to all who will read this page. They are comparable to Poe on the grounds of merit but are wholly individual and unique. Their classic style, their consummate realism of detail, their intense distillation of atmosphere, their sustained wing-flight on the black outer cosmos or into stark prehuman antiquities, all combine to the creation of a new literary dimension. Like the personality that produced them, they will never be duplicated.

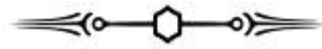
On H. P. Lovecraft I



I AM PROFOUNDLY saddened by the news of H. P. Lovecraft's death after a month of painful illness. The loss seems an intolerable one, and I am sure that it will be felt deeply and permanently by the whole weird fiction public. Most of all will it be felt by the myriad friends who knew Lovecraft through face-to-face meeting or correspondence: for in his case the highest literary genius was allied to the most brilliant and most endearing personal qualities. I — alas! — never met him, but we had corresponded for about seventeen years, and I felt that I knew him better than most people with whom I was thrown in daily intimacy. The first manuscript of his that I read (probably in 1920) confirmed me in the opinion of his genius from which I have never swerved at any time. It opened a new world of awesome speculation and eery surmise, a new imaginative dimension. Since then, he has written scores of masterpieces that extend the borders of human fantasy and conquer fresh empires amid the extra-human and ultra-terrestrial infinities. Among these, I might mention *The Outsider*, *The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Color Out of Space*, *The Rats in the Walls*, *The Dunwich Horror*, *Pickman's Model* and *The Dreams in the Witch-House* as being special favourites, however, there are few tales of his that I have not read and re-read many times, always with that peculiar delight given by the savor of some uniquely potent distillation of dreams and fantasy. Leng and Lomar and witch-ridden Arkham and sea-cursed Innsmouth are part of my mental geography; and dreadful, cyclopean R'lyeh slumbers somewhere in time depths. Others will venture into the realms that the Silver Key of his mastery has unlocked; but none will read them with the same wizard surety,

or bring back for our delectation essences of equal dread and beauty and horror.

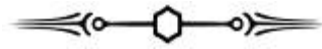
On H. P. Lovecraft II



PERHAPS BY THIS time you will have heard the sad news of Lovecraft's passing. He died on Monday morning, March 15th, from gastro-intestinal and kidney trouble (chronic Bright's disease) from which he had suffered for years. The news is infinitely depressing, and all who knew him personally or even by correspondence are stunned by the shock... He made clinical notes of the progress of his malady for the doctor till the pen dropped from his fingers.

Plans are already under way for the publication of an omnibus volume of H. P. L.'s work, to contain about thirty of his stories, his best poems, and essays; his own written choice to be followed as much as possible in the selection. August W. Derleth and Donald Wandrei are in charge of the undertaking. Wandrei is also planning to publish privately a selection of H. P. L.'s letters. This last, I venture to say, will establish him as one of the greatest letter-writers who ever lived, and will exhibit manifold angles of his astounding genius. Unparalleled erudition, scholarship, critical ability, wit, humor, fancy, generosity — a hundred other admirable traits are displayed to the fullest in the correspondence to which he gave, toward the end, at least half of his time. He gave untiring and invaluable mentorship to many young writers; and I know of at least one occasion where he played, with infinite wisdom and thoughtfulness, the difficult role of father-confessor to a young woman. The loss to literature is incalculable; but the heritage he has left will establish him among the greatest writers of modern times.

Atmosphere in Weird Fiction



THE TERM *ATMOSPHERE*, in application to fiction, is often used in a somewhat vague or restricted sense. I believe that it can be most profitably defined as the collective impression created by the entire mass of descriptive, directly evocative details in any given story (what is sometimes known as “local color”) together with all that is adumbrated, suggested or connoted through or behind these details. It can be divided roughly into two elements: the *kinetic* and the *potential*; the former comprising all the effects of overt surface imagery, and the latter all the implications, hints, undertones, shadows, nuances, and the verbal associations, and various effects of rhythm, onomatopoeia and phonetic pattern which form a more consistent and essential feature of good prose-writing than is commonly realized. Many people would apply the word *atmosphere* only to the elements defined here-above as potential; but I prefer the broader definition; since, after all, the most intangible atmospheric effects depend more or less upon the kinetic ones and are often difficult to dissociate wholly from them through analysis. An attempt to achieve purely potential writing might result, I suspect, in something not altogether dissimilar to the effusions of Gertrude Stein! Or, at least, it would lead to an obscurity such as was practiced by the French Symbolist poet, Mallarmé, who is said to have revised his poems with an eye to the elimination of kinetic statement whenever possible.

A few examples of the use of atmospheric elements, taken from the work of recognized masters, should prove more illuminative than any amount of generalization. Take, for instance, this paragraph from Ambrose Bierve’s

tale, *The Death of Halpin Frayser*, one of the most overwhelmingly terrific horror, tales ever written:

He thought that he was walking along a dusty road that showed white in the gathering darkness of the summer night. *Whence and whither it led, and why he traveled it*, he did not know, though all seemed simple and natural, as is the way in dreams; for in the Land Beyond the Bed surprises cease from troubling and the Judgement is at rest. Soon he came to the parting of the ways; leading from the highway was a road less traveled, *having the appearance, indeed, of having been long abandoned, because, he thought, it led to something evil*; yet he turned into it without hesitation, *impelled by some mysterious necessity*.

Note here the potential value of the italicized clauses. The element of dream-mystery is heightened by the unknown reason for traveling the road, by the “something evil” which has no form or name, and the unparticularized necessity for taking the abandoned way. The ambiguity, the lack of precise definition, stimulate the reader’s imagination and evoke shadowy meanings beyond the actual words.

In the paragraph immediately following this, the potential elements are even more predominant:

As he pressed forward he became conscious that *his way was haunted by malevolent existences, invisible, and whom he could not definitely figure to his mind. From among the trees on either side he caught broken whispers in a strange tongue which yet he partly understood. They seemed to him fragmentary utterances of a monstrous conspiracy against his body and his soul*.

Here, through the generalized character of malevolence imputed to things unseen and half-heard, images of almost illimitable spectral menace are conjured up. It should not be inferred, however, that precise statements

and sharply outlined images are necessarily lacking in potential quality. On the contrary, they may possess implications no less frightful or mysterious than the wildly distorted shadow cast by some monster seen in glaring light. To illustrate this point, let me quote again from *The Death of Halpin Frayser*:

A shallow pool in the guttered depression of an old wheel rut, as from a recent rain, met his eye with a crimson gleam. He stooped and plunged his hands into it. It stained his fingers; it was blood. Blood, he then observed, was about him everywhere. The weeds growing rankly by the roadside showed it in blots and spashes on their big broad leaves. Patches of dry dust between the wheelways were pitted and sputtered as with a red ruin. Defiling the trunks of the trees were broad maculations of crimson, and blood dripped like dew from their foliage.

This, it would seem, is a prime example of kinetic atmospheric description, owing its power to a visual definitude and exactness rarely equaled. Consider a moment, however, and you will realize the added potential element which lies in the unexplained mystery of the bloody dew, and the abnormally strange position of many of the sanguine maculations. Things infinitely more dreadful and more horrible than the blood itself are somehow intimated.

In much of Poe's best work, the atmospheric elements are so subtly blended, unified and pervasive as to make analysis rather difficult. Something beyond and above the mere words and images seems to well from the entire fabric of the work, like the "pestilent and mystic vapor" which, to the narrator's fancy, appeared to emanate from the melancholy House of Usher and its inexplicably dismal surroundings. The profuse but always significant details evoke dimly heard echoes and remote correspondences. Suggestion is less easily separable from statement, and

becomes a vague dark iridescence communicated from word to word, from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to page, like the play of lurid gleams along somber jewels cunningly chosen and set. To this suggestive element the rhythms, cadences and phonetic sequences of the prose contribute materially but more or less indeterminably. As an illustration of well-nigh perfect atmospheric writing, embodying the qualities I have indicated, I quote from *The Fall of the House of Usher* the description of the room in which Roderick Usher receives his guest;

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eyes, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. *The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique and tattered.* Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to lend any vitality to the scene. I felt I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. *An air of stern, deep and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.*

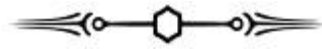
Note here the carefully built impression of spaciousness combined with gloom and confinement, of lifeless and uncomfortable luxury. Through the choice and emphasis of material details, an air of spiritual oppression is created, and the idea of a mysterious and monstrous unity between the building and its hypochondriacal owner is cautiously foreshadowed. I have italicized two sentences in which I seem to find a very subtle congruity between the actual sound of the words and their sense. In the first, the frequent repetition of the consonants r, s, fs and t somehow emphasizes the

image of “profuse” furniture; and the sharp dentals and sibilants add to the impression of things time-eaten and “comfortless.” In the last sentence, the repeated letters, n, r, d, l, m, and v, are all of a heavy or deep-sounding character, giving, with the long, close and sonorous vowels, a hollow and funeral clang that echoes the meaning. Here, too, the very movement of the sentence is like the dropping of a pall.

From certain of Poe’s tales and prose-poems, such as *The Masque of the Red Death*, *Silence* and *Shadow*, one can select even more obvious and overt effects of atmospheric color supplemented by sound and rhythm. For illustration, I shall quote a single sentence from the prose-poem, *Silence*, and leave its analysis to the reader: “And overhead, with a rustling and loud noise, the grey clouds rush westwardly forever, until they roll, a cataract, over the fiery wall of the horizon.”

From such instances as these, it will be seen how large a portion of the atmospheric elements in writing can sometimes be contributed by the mere sound of words apart from their meaning. The values implied are vaguely akin to those of music; and it should be obvious that really fine prose cannot be written without an ear for pitch, tone, movement and cadence.

The Decline of Civilization: A Note on ‘The Dark Age’



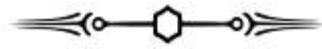
“THE DARK AGE” was written to illustrate how easily scientific knowledge and its resultant inventions could be lost to the human race following the complete breakdown of a mechanistic civilization such as the present one. The tale seems far from fantastic or impossible; and I have tried to bring out several points and to emphasize the part played by mere chance and by personal emotions and reactions.

I have shown the old knowledge conserved by a select few, the Custodians, who, in the beginning, are forced to isolate themselves completely because of the hostility displayed by the barbarians. Through habit, the isolation becomes permanent even when it is no longer necessary; and with the sole exception of Atullos, who has been expelled from the laboratory-fortress by his fellows, none of the Custodians tries to help the benighted people about them.

In the end, through human passion, prejudice, misunderstanding, the Custodians perish with all their lore; and the night of the Dark Age is complete. The reader will note certain ironic ifs and might-have-beens in the tale. Other points that I have stressed are the immense, well-nigh insuperable difficulties met by Atullos in his attempt to reconstruct, amid primitive conditions, a few of the lost inventions for the benefit of the savages; and the total frustration of Torquane’s studies and experiments through mere inability to read the books left by his dead father.

Also I have shown how a chemical, such as gunpowder, might be used by one who had learned its effects but was wholly ignorant of its origin and nature.

Planets and Dimensions



IN WRITING FANTASTIC science tales, two themes have attracted me more than others, and have seemed to offer the amplest possibilities and the deepest stimulus to imagination: the interplanetary and the inter-dimensional themes. Among those of my stories that can be classed, more or less accurately, as science fiction, the majority have dealt either with worlds remote in space, or worlds hidden from human perception by their different vibratory rate or atomic composition.

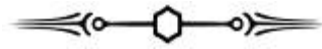
I am glad that my tale of life on Venus, “World of Horror,” (An alternate title for “The Immeasurable Horror,” originally published in *Weird Tales*, Sept. 1931, and in *OTHER DIMENSIONS* (Arkham House, 1970).) found favour with many readers of *Tales of Wonder*. I hope to return presently to this type of story, which, though exploited by so many authors, is still rich in unsounded potentialities. Indeed, there are no limits to their development except those of the writer’s imagination. Here, however, lies the difficulty, since it is impossible for one to conceive forms and conditions of life, matter and energy that are wholly diverse from all terrestrial states and forms.

And yet, when one considers the fantastic variations of life on this one tiny planet, there seems little reason to presuppose that life on other worlds will necessarily repeat, or even resemble, the types known to us. In future ages, when space-transit has become a reality, our wildest fictions may seem feeble and commonplace beside the fantasies of Nature itself that explorers will discover on alien globes.

Among my several inter-dimensional stories, I think “City of Singing Flame” is the best. I owe its inspiration to several camping sojourns amid time high Sierras, at a spot within easy walking distance of the Crater Ridge described by Angarth and Hastane. The Ridge is a wild eerie place, differing wholly in its geology and general aspect from the surrounding region, exactly as pictured in the story. It impressed my imagination profoundly, suggesting almost at first sight the contiguity of some unknown, invisible world to which it might afford the mundane approach and entrance. And, since I have never explored the whole of its area, I am not altogether sure that the worn, broken column-ends found by the story’s narrators do not really exist somewhere among the curiously shaped and charactered stones that lie in such strange abundance there!

All fantasy apart, however, it seems to me that the theory of interlocking worlds in one that might be offered and defended. We know nothing of the ranges of vibration, the forms of matter and energy, that may lie beyond the testing of our most delicate instruments. Spheres and beings whose atomic structure removes them from all detection may float through or beside the Earth, no less oblivious of our existence than we of theirs. Transit between planes of space, though filled with obvious material difficulties, is at least more readily comprehensible than time-travelling.

George Sterling: Poet and Friend



MY SIXTEEN YEARS' friendship and correspondence with George Sterling began, like so many human relationships, through another friendship. In 1911, when I had reached the age of eighteen, Miss Emily J. Hamilton, late of Oakland, was teacher of English literature at the Auburn High School. Though not one of her pupils (since my formal schooling was already finished) I had been showing her my verses for some months. These verses she was so good as to criticize and, on occasion, praise. One day she said: "Why not send some of your poems to George Sterling?"

The suggestion both delighted and dismayed me. It seemed rather like venturing to address a demigod, and I was a little doubtful whether the deity could even be reached through a medium so mundane and prosaic as the mails. Since my fifteenth year I had sought, read and admired with almost acolytish fervor everything published by Sterling in current magazines, together with his two early volumes of poetry. It was anomalous, even fabulous that such poetry could be written by a contemporary. How could I find the presumption to approach this Apollonian being with my own Marsyas-like crudities?

My friend reassured me. The demigod not only had a local habitation but was, she hinted, very human — almost, if anything, too human. He was gracious, kindly, helpful, to the novices of the Muse. She had known him in his Piedmont days, with Jack London, Joaquin Miller, Herman Whitaker, Herman Scheffauer. If I wished, she would write him a letter introducing my verses and me.

This began a correspondence that was to end only a week prior to Sterling's death in November, 1926. From the first, his letters showed the interest of a master in a promising pupil; and soon they were tinged with the affection of an older brother writing to a younger. I believe he regarded me as standing, in relation to him, somewhat as he had been in relation to Ambrose Beirce; and sought to pass on, in his turn, the critical help, encouragement and praise he had received from Beirce. His letters were rich in technical instruction and correction, though perhaps over — encomiastic. They chronicled his movements, the poems he wrote, the people he met; they flashed with incisive observations, admonitions, touches of gentle humor, epigrams of pagan philosophy or timely comment. They were marked by unfailing solicitude and thoughtfulness. They contained snatches of self-revelation that were boyishly frank. Unconsciously, they sketched the outlines of a character brave, noble, generous in the antique manner; self-forgetful to a fault; modest for himself but eager to proclaim a friend's worth; responsive to beauty in every living nerve, whether the beauty was that of an ocean sunset, a line of poetry, a mountain, or a woman's face.

My first meeting with Sterling was delayed till late in June, 1912, when, at his long-repeated invitation, I went down to spend a month with him in Carmel. I remember well the circumstances. Sterling had come with a horse and wagon to meet my train in Monterey but had somehow missed me at the station. [NB, CAS was told by the train conductor to get off at San Jose, and had to purchase another ticket to Monterey, to get a later train, or so he confided many years later to his wife. He had delayed accepting GS's invitation until GS finally understood the delay, and sent him ten dollars to pay train fare. The cost of the second ticket took the remainder of his

money. He never, of course, told Sterling that he'd walked to Carmel because he'd had no money left, nor of why he was late. Ed.]

Giving him up after a few minutes' wait, I decided to walk the four miles over the ridge to Carmel, and started in the thickening dusk through a country that was thrillingly new and strange to me. Some dweller on the outskirts of Carmel steered me vaguely in the general direction of Sterling's house. The road ran obscurely through a black forest starred with infrequent lights, and seemed to end at the last visible light. A woman (Mrs. Michael Williams, I believe) redirected me. I had only to cross a wooden footbridge and follow a narrow, winding path down the ravine. There, in the pine-fragrant darkness, I came to the blurred outlines of a cabin and a house; I knocked on the cabin's door. A high, cracked, New England voice sang out, "Come in, Clark Ashton Smith!"

The cabin's kerosine lamp revealed a figure which, after all the years, and after the very silence and absence of death, seems much more presently alive and vital than many that walk the earth today. About him there was something of the world's youth, something of kinship with its eternal life and the agelessness of the sea. His fine brown aquiline features, his strange mingling of grace and vigor, made one think of a beardless Sylvan or Poseidon. Somehow, in spite of its modernness, his very costume contributed to the impression of viability: he wore golf clothes and stockings of dark green, with a green bow tie and brown canvas shoes. In lieu of a leopard-skin, of wreath of vine-leaves or sea-wrack, the garb was not too inappropriate.

His first gesture, after our greetings and explanations, was the pouring of a joint libation from a wicker-covered gallon demi-john filled with muscatel. The spicy golden wine was indeed the nectar of Parnassus. It was made, I

believe, in Monterey; but no muscatel of these latter seasons has ever had quite the same savor and potency.

Thus, for me, began a month of rare companionship and happiness. At that time Carmel consisted merely of one main street and a woodland in which the scattered houses were mostly lost to sight. On one side, between Sterling's house and the main street, the pine forest stretched unbroken, peopled only by jays and quail and rabbits. Here Sterling could hunt game or collect pine-knots and logs for fuel. The sea, though hidden from view, was not far distant; and its murmur mingled always with the murmuring of the tree-tops. It was a milieu of enchantment for a boy who had lived wholly heretofore amid inland hills.

Robinson Jeffers has written of Sterling's Indian-like familiarity with the coast about Carmel. Truly, he was the genius of that scene and nothing escaped his observation and knowledge. I remember the hidden sea-cavern that he showed me below Point Lobos; the places where wild strawberries grew the thickest; the abalone-reefs; and the furtive incursions of a strange lurid red fungus that he pointed out to me on the Lobos cypresses. This fungus, in latter years, has increased so much it seems to illumine the boughs and boles of certain trees as with the reflection of hellish fires; but in 1912 it was confined to a few scattered thumbnail patches.

Like all Who love life greatly, Sterling loved the sea: its changing moods and colors and voices; and the things that lurked in its ultramarine depths or were cast up on its tawny beaches. Almost it seemed at times that he was native to that third element, like one of the Swimmers in his own weird and lovely poem.

At the time of my visit, Sterling had given the use of his house to John Kenneth Turner, author of BARBAROUS MEXICO, and Turner's wife and children, Turner being in temporary financial difficulties. Sterling was

occupying the little cabin he had built for Nora May French; but, turning this over to me, he moved into a little tent for the duration of my stay.

He spoke often of Nora May French, that strange and tragically gifted girl who had ended her life with poison in the same bed in which I slept nightly. She had, it seems, previously attempted to shoot herself with his revolver and had brought him a tress of her ashen-blond hair clipped away by the bullet. He showed me the very spot beside the path up the ravine where this attempt had occurred, according to her statement. But, oddly, there had been no powder marks on her hair. I do not recall that he attributed her suicide to unrequited love for James Hopper; but there had been other reasons... perhaps sufficient ones.

She was, he said, the most changeable person he had ever known: incredibly radiant and beautiful at times; at others, absolutely dull and colorless in her appearance. One day he brought out a manuscript of hers dictated during the delirium of illness. It was full of an otherworld weirdness; but I can remember nothing of it, but that it was “such stuff as dreams are made of” and therefore immemorable as dreams.

On one occasion, I recall that George told me to keep the cabin door shut at night. “if you don’t,” he warned, “the cat will come in and jump on the bed. You’ll think it’s Miss X trying to climb into bed with you, and you’ll be scared.” “Oh no,” I rejoined, “I’ll probably think it’s Nora May’s ghost, and I won’t be scared at all. I’m sure that her ghost would be a lovely one.” “You certainly have an imagination,” he commented, half admiringly, half deprecatingly.

Sterling was alone then; his wife Carrie (who I never met) being in Oakland. I have said that he was the genius loci of that coast: he was also the presiding genius among the artists in Carmel, who included Fred Bechdolt, Michael Williams, Herbert Heron, Redfern Mason, John Northern

Hilliard, Grace McGowan Cook, and Chris Jorgensen. George was their leader in a standing feud with the forces of realty and “civic progress,” headed by Perry Newberry, who wished to urbanize Carmel and promote a boom in lot-buying and house-building. The war was fought lustily and bitterly; and the two factions were scarcely on speaking terms.

Life, however, seemed simple and leisurely there. Almost every morning, if I recall rightly George took me on a round of calls, often distributing surplus game among his friends. There were wagon-rides up the Carmel valley, along the 17 mile Drive to Point Lobos, and a sea-fowl haunted spot several miles below Lobos where we picnicked with the Turner family. There were mussel-stews and incredibly complicated “mulligans” cooked amid the white sand-dunes; there were walks to Pebble Beach and in the woodlands carpeted with yerba buena and wild strawberry plants.

Also, there were rituals to be observed, such as the pounding of abalone steaks with a big wooden mallet on a boulder in the back yard; and the making each afternoon of a huge pitcher of punch, compounded subtly with Bourbon and soda, sliced pineapple and mint from the meadow-bottom below the house. I was privileged to purvey the mint. George often commented on my temperance, since I would never exceed a fourth glass of that delectable brew.

I do not recall any excessive drinking on George’s part; unless the term can be applied to his consumption of numerous bottles of beer at a beach picnic. Later he apologized, saying that beer was a swinish drink. But the Saxons (he believed himself to be mainly of Saxon blood) had always been prone to it. Either on this occasion or some other, he maintained the superiority of the Saxon over the Gaelic peoples. Perhaps he had this prejudice in mind when he wrote the lines of that splendid lyric, *The Princess on the Headland*.

Anyway, his prejudices were always strongly held and stoutly supported. Among others, he frankly despised the men of mere affairs and money-making divorced from all else. "They are mutts," he said, "That's what their women call them..."

Regarding women, his advice was often sage, and often exquisitely raffish... "Don't ever let a woman get the upper hand of you," he counseled. "Rule them with a rod of iron."

His physical fitness was remarkable but he told me that he had not always been as robust. He brought out a photograph taken during his Piedmont period— "Look how thin I was then!" Indeed, the picture was all profile — an esthetic-looking shadow. He attributed the improvement in his health to a system of exercises devised by Sanford Rennett, a San Francisco business man who claimed to have rejuvenated himself when past fifty. The exercises were based on a principle of alternate tension and relaxation; and one in particular involved massage of the abdominal muscles under tension. It was supposed to strengthen the digestive powers.

Many years later I began to experiment with Bennett's system myself, and can testify that its claims are far from exaggerated.

At the end of my Carmel stay, Sterling accompanied me to San Francisco, from which city I returned shortly to Auburn. We spent a night in Oakland as the guests of George's friend, Roosevelt Johnson, who seemed as distinctly an incarnation of the old Roman world as George was of the Greek.

A. M. Robertson, Sterling's publisher, had agreed to bring out my first volume of verse, *THE STAR TREADER AND OTHER POEMS*.

George was indefatigable in assisting me with the endless correction of galley and page proofs exchanged by mail. Previously, he had advised me in the choice of poems for the collection. The numerous letters that he wrote

me at this time, as well as these in regard to my subsequent volumes of verse, testify eloquently to his unbounded generosity and helpfulness toward a fellow-aspirant to the Muses' laurels.

Our next meeting occurred early in 1914, just prior to Sterling's departure for New York after his final separation from Carrie. After visits to Colt Bierce and Jack London, he stopped in Auburn and spent some time with my parents and me. I remember that he was "on the wagon" at the time but had brought along an immense box of chocolate candy, most of which he consumed himself, with the result of a sleepless night! During that brief visit he endeared himself greatly to my parents.

He was vastly interested in a mining-shaft which my father and I had started, and often referred to it in his subsequent letters from the east. He sent me from New York the ms. of a mining story he had written, and asked me to revise it in regard to the correct legal points of claim-staking and filing. These details my...

Here the manuscript stops short. It resumes on of the manuscript.

Sterling also assisted me in choosing the poems for ODES AND SONNETS, published by the Book Club of California for which Sterling wrote the preface. Three years later he was to write the foreword for my third volume, EBONY AND CRYSTAL.

I made occasional visits to San Francisco during those years, and George was always my companion and cicerone. He was then domiciled permanently at the Bohemian Club. Many of my memories of him are associated with the Club, and with such favorite latin restaurants as the Trattoria Bolognese (more familiarly known as the Bologna) presided over by the affable Bigin. Here, as elsewhere in San Francisco, the spirit of Bohemia was not unduly subdued by the devastations of the Volstead Act.

I recall, too, that George took me on charming visits to Mrs. Travis (Lawrence Zenda) and the tall, statuesque blond Mrs. Warlock, whom he called “Boadicea.”

One day, in that den of silence and solitude, the Bohemian Club library, he gave me the manuscript of “Lilith” to read.

Either I did not wholly grasp the play’s tremendous import and poetic opulence at that first hasty reading, or else I was backward in expressing my appreciation; for, after its publication, he seemed surprised at the enthusiasm with which I wrote of it in a letter. Truly, it is a magnificent thing, and without parallel in modern literature, apart from the poetic plays of Swinburne and D’Annunzio.

I like to recall those evenings at Bigin’s, which have about them the charm of a time irretrievably vanished and remote.

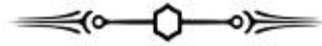
George, a little grey, was still master of the revels. Stella was gone, but there were other dancers in that world such as Marie Parmalee, and the two Nicol girls, Margaret and Amaryllis, whom I had known during their childhood in Auburn.

George Sterling died in 1926 [burn] [The last] time that my friend and I met face to face was during, between Christmas and New Years. He was ill in bed at the Bohemian Club: the result of an over-successful Yuletide celebration. I remarked then at the semi-monastic bareness of his room, aside from the pictured constellations of feminine beauty on the walls. There were few books. He told me that he no longer cared to accumulate many possessions. Long since,...

Here the manuscript ends in burned fragments. It is a tragedy that miscellaneous works as these had to be lost in whole or in part, but instead of crying over the irretrievable, let us be thankful for what we have left.

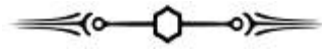
The Philosophy of the Weird Tale

(An extract from The Black Book of Clark Ashton Smith)



THE WEIRD TALE is an adumbration or foreshadowing of man's relationship — past, present, and future — to the unknown and infinite, and also an implication of his mental and sensory evolution. Further insight into basic mysteries is only possible through future development of higher faculties than the known senses. Interest in the weird, unknown, and supernormal is a signpost of such development and not merely a psychic residuum from the age of superstition.

Review of Marianne Moore's 'Nevertheless'



THE SIX PIECES in this tiny volume, written by a winner of numerous prize-awards, impress the present viewer as being fairly mild examples of modernist decadence. That is to say, they are as far from good poetry as they are from the absolute deliquescence of thought and language in such a writer as E. E. Cummings. One finds thought and observation in Miss Moore: but hardly such as to reward one for breaking the gnarled and spiny husk of diction. There is, as in so many other “modernists,” an attempt to give distinction to the undistinguished through a sharp dislocation of rhythm and an eccentricity of image and phrase often carried to the verge of the ludicrous. For example, take the opening of the first poem, so eloquently entitled *Nevertheless*

*you've seen a strawberry
that's seen a struggle; yet
there was, where the fragments met,*

*a hedgehog or a star-
fish for the multitude
of seeds.*

After puzzling out the various turns and twists of this knotty effusion, one finds only a bit of commonplace didacticism, summed up in the sentence

*Victory won't come
to me unless I go*

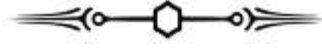
to it.

On Grotesque Carvings



I HAVE WORKED entirely on carving since December, and so far have turned out about twenty-six new pieces. Only a few of these are grotesques, since I have got to experimenting with the ornamental possibilities of my materials and have made small flower-vases, trays, liquor-cups, candlesticks and even rings and a brooch on a scarf-pin. Also there are six tobacco-pipes, three of which have been disposed of. One of the remaining pipes is a grotesque which I call Water Wizard: the bowl representing the wizard's head, and the mouthpiece his familiar in the shape of a black fish. The stem is made from a rare species of bamboo with yellow and purplish mottlings. I am planning more pipes, one to represent Tsathoggua, and the other an inhabitant of Innsmouth. Among the other new carvings I have a figurine entitled *Primal Fish*, which I am pricing at \$8.00; a bust entitled *Visitor from Outside* at \$6.50; and a half-length statuette, *Progeny of Azathoth*, which is a little on the lines of *The Elder God*, though with more animation in face and tentacles; this I am pricing at \$8.00.

A Cosmic Novel: 'The Web of Easter Island'



THIS FIRST NOVEL by Donald Wandrei is imbued throughout with the same unique qualities of cosmic imagination that distinguished *The Red Brain*, *Earth Minus*, *Finality Unlimited*, and numerous other short tales by him. The mystery of the megalithic remains of Stonehenge and Easter Island has been woven into a narrative that involves ulterior dimensions and endlessly repeated cycles of time and super-time.

The novel begins with the mysterious and disastrous events that follow the finding of an anomalous green image by a child in a long-disused and ill-reputed graveyard at Isling, England. This image is the Keeper of the Seal, mentioned in an Asian manuscript written in a tongue far older than Sanskrit:

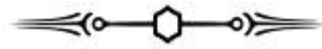
Out of crypts deeper than the clouds are high shall the Keeper of the Seal issue forth a summons to the Titans. The Keeper of the Seal shall become even as the Titans and take his place on Crltul Thr.

Drawn by a newspaper account of the strange events at Isling, Carter Graham, a museum curator, investigates the unused graveyard, and becomes the temporary possessor of the Keeper of the Seal. Later, having fortunately lost the image, he descends with a companion into a vault of prodigious depth and extent beneath the graveyard, a vault designed as a sort of time-trap by the macrocosmic titans who had built it a million and five hundred years ago for their own sinister but scientific purposes. Graham escapes from the trap by a narrow margin of time, but his companion suffers the same doom that had overtaken numberless others, both men and the ancestors of men.

In the meantime, a fugitive wife-murderer has become the involuntary and unwitting owner of the green image. He meets on shipboard a strangely beautiful woman, with hair half white, half black, who, it seems, has made a surreptitious disposal of her husband. Their meeting affords a highly piquant episode — a spice of mundanity amid elements of ultraspatial tenor and super-human vastness.

The tale unravels a web far-spun in time and place, and mounts to a stupendous climax on Easter Island, where Graham goes to confront the returning titans from the macrocosmos. Its premises, events and implications are among the most staggering in imaginative literature. Wholly original in style and concept, it is a worthy congener to such Lovecraft masterpieces as *The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Colour out of Space*, and *The Shadow out of Time*.

On Science Fiction History



I HAVE READ the symposium on science-fiction the Winter 1949 issue with great interest. Since you have summed up so ably in your editorial the main deductions to be drawn, I will content myself with a few footnotes, so to speak. For one thing, it struck me that most of the contributors (Dr. Keller excepted) failed to emphasize sufficiently the historical aspect of the theme and were too exclusively preoccupied with its contemporary development. Yet surely, for the proper understanding of the genre and of fantasy in general, some consideration should be given to its roots in ancient literature, folklore, mythology, anthropology, occultism, and mysticism.

I was quite surprised that no one mentioned Lucian, Apulcius and Rabelais among the forefathers of the genre, since all three are of prime importance. Lucian was a satirist and skeptic who, in the form of imaginative fiction, endeavored to “debunk” the religious superstitions and contending philosophies of his time; being, one might say, somewhat analogous to Aldous Huxley, who in turn has satirised modern science. Apuleius, borrowing a plot from Lucian in *The Golden Ass*, expressed, on the other hand, the power and glamor of a sorcery that was regarded as science by the moiety of his contemporaries; and his book, in its final chapter, plunges deeply into that mysticism which is seemingly eternal and common to many human minds in all epochs. The omission of Rabelais is particularly surprising, since he was not only the first of modern satiric fantaisists, but also one of the first writers to develop the Utopian theme (so

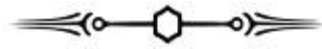
much exploited since) in his phalanstery of Theleme — which, I might add, is the only fictional Utopia that I should personally care to inhabit!

Another thing that struck me was the ethical bias shown by some of the contributors, a bias characteristic of so many science-fiction fans, as opposed to the devotees of pure fantasy. Such fans are obviously lovers of the imaginative and the fantastic more or less curbed in the indulgence of their predilections by a feeling that the fiction in which they delight should proceed (however remote its ultimate departure) from what is currently regarded as proven fact and delimited natural law; otherwise, there is something reprehensible in yielding themselves to its enjoyment. Without entering into the old problem of ethics plus art, or ethics versus art, I can say only that from my own standpoint the best application of ethics would lie in the sphere where it is manifestly not being applied: that is to say, the practical use of scientific discoveries and inventions. Imaginative literature would be happier and more fruitful with unclogged wings; and the sphere of its enjoyment would be broader.

What pleased me most about the symposium was the prominence given to Wells and to Charles Fort, and the inclusion of your anthology, *Strange Ports of Call*. I could mention books, out of my own far from complete reading of science-fiction, that were missed or slighted by the contributors. Of these, Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* is perhaps the most salient from a literary perspective. It is a gorgeous and sumptuous satire on the results of self-achieved immortality. Leonard Cline's *The Dark Chamber* could be mentioned, too, since it depicts with singular power the retrogression of a human being to the primal slime. Incidentally, one ought to mention Lucian's *True History*, for it contains what is probably the first interplanetary tale, a fantastic account of a voyage to the moon. And sometimes I suspect that Freud should be included among the modern

masters of science-fiction! But one could multiply titles without adding anything of permanent literary value and significance.

Why I Selected: ‘The Uncharted Isle’

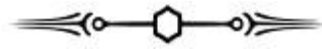


ALTHOUGH BETTER KNOWN for my writings in the fantasy field, I have at different times turned out what is called the straight science fiction story. After due thought I have chosen THE UNCHARTED ISLE as my best — or, at least, my favorite — for several reasons. Of these, the first is that, while having a basis in theoretic science, the tale is not merely an ordinary science fiction story, but it can be read as an allegory of human disorientation.

Then, too, it is written in what I think is a literate style while at the same time being free from conventional plot complications. Neither is it cumbered with pseudo-technical explanatory matter. And lastly, because my work is always selected for fantasy, this story has not been selected for inclusion in other anthologies, leaving me happily free to offer it herewith as a fresh science fiction item.

I hope you enjoy the reading half as much as I enjoyed the writing.

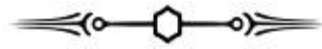
About 'The Plutonian Drug'



THE PLUTONIAN DRUG is, in my opinion, among my best in the genre of science-fiction. For one thing, it is the sort of tale that can hardly become “dated” in spite of changing vogues and varying themes. And it has the advantages of conciseness and brevity.

The field of speculation that it opens is a fascinating one, and hardly to be exhausted. Benjamin Paul Blood (and, no doubt, others) has hinted that our deepest perceptions of reality may come to us beneath the influence of drugs: a proposition equally impossible to prove or disprove. *Quien Sabe?*

On Tales about the Cthulhu Mythos



AS TO THE Cthulhu Mythos, I believe I added as much to it as I borrowed. Tsathoggua and the Book of Eibon were my own inventions, and were promptly utilized by Lovecraft. In turn, I borrowed the Necronomicon, which, in its original Arabic, was featured in my yarn *The Return of the Sorcerer*. Also, I used a quotation from the Necronomicon for a heading on another tale, *The Nameless Offspring*. Tsathoggua made his debut in *The Tale of Satampra Zeiros*, and also played some part in *The Door to Saturn* and *The Seven Geases*. *The Coming of the White Worm* was supposedly a chapter from the Book of Eibon; and the book was also featured in *Ubbo-Sathla* and in *The holiness of Azederac* (which latter story mentioned two Lovecraftian deities under the slightly altered names of Iog-Sotot and Kthulhut). Eibon himself entered prominently into *The Door to Saturn*. All of these titles, then, can be considered as having more or less relationship to the Cthulhu Mythos.

21 July 1953

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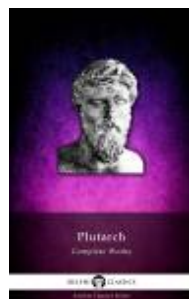
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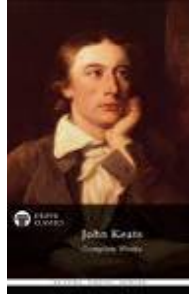
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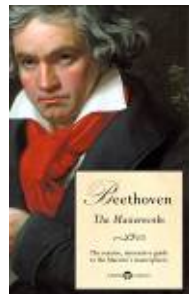
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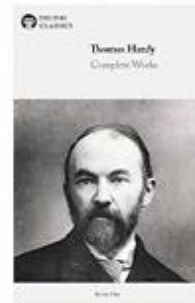
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In 1961 Smith suffered a series of strokes and he quietly died in his sleep, aged 68. His ashes were buried by a boulder, close to the site of his childhood home in Auburn, California.